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Interpreting the Pentateuch

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Lesson 1: Genesis 1, Creation, part 1 (with an overview to the series)

Introduction to the Pentateuch Series

King David praised the word of God in Psalm 19 with these words:

- ⁷ The law of the LORD is perfect, restoring the soul;
The testimony of the LORD is sure, making wise the simple.
- ⁸ The precepts of the LORD are right, rejoicing the heart;
The commandment of the LORD is pure, enlightening the eyes.
- ⁹ The fear of the LORD is clean, enduring forever;
The judgments of the LORD are true; they are righteous altogether.
- ¹⁰ They are more desirable than gold, yes, than much fine gold;
Sweeter also than honey and the drippings of the honeycomb.

I loved this passage in college. I remember marking it all up in my Bible. Though I am not sure when I asked the question, “What exactly was David talking about? What was his Bible?” The answer of course is the Pentateuch, the Law of Moses, the first five books of the Bible, also with the books of Joshua and Judges. That makes me consider Psalm 19 in a new light. I have to ask myself, “Do I consider the first five books of the Bible sweeter than honey and more desirable than gold? And if not, why not? Is it because these books are not sweeter than honey and not more desirable than gold? Or is it that I do not know them well enough to experience the sweetness and the value that David experienced?” I have worked over the surface and picked up many wonderful gems lying about, especially from Genesis and Exodus. How though do I dig deeper to experience this kind of appreciation for the words of Moses that David describes?

Moses had written in Deuteronomy 17:18-19 that when Israel does come to have a king, “he shall write for himself a copy of this law on a scroll in the presence of the Levitical priests. And it shall be with him, and he shall read it all the days of his life...” That’s not something I can see most of the kings of Israel doing, but David, I could see David obeying this one. He wrote it out. He memorized it. He reflected on it. He chewed it over in his mind and tried to apply it to his personal life and to the governance of the nation.

Of course, David made some really big mistakes and did not understand everything or even apply all of what he did understand. Still, he sought after God and was able to sincerely say, “This is gold to me. This is honey.”

To be fair, we have the wonderful news of the Messiah described in the gospels. We have the details of our new covenant played out in the real-life letters to the churches. We have a new vision of history in John’s Revelation. We have a lot more Bible to focus on than David did. That’s true. So, it makes sense that we spend a lot of our time in the New Testament. At the same time, our own understanding of the new covenant that applies to us is greatly enhanced by our study of the old covenant that applied to them. Paul calls our covenant the covenant of Grace and their covenant the covenant of Law, particularly in Romans 6-7. But it would be a serious mistake to think that there is no grace in the Law or that there is no law in the covenant of Grace. We have the dos and don’ts of commandment all over the New Testament. Just read Matthew 5-8, Ephesians 4-6, Romans 12-15 or the book of James. We have a lot of commandment, and we need to know how law works in our covenant of Grace. One of the ways to better understand that is to go back and get a picture of how grace works in the covenant of Law. Study of the Law of Moses should give us insight into the new covenant of Jesus.

The Pentateuch is the singular most important document for understanding the background of the New Testament. The beginning of a Christian worldview starts here with Interpreting the Pentateuch. We are not going to go verse by verse through these five books. This will be a survey study. We are going to address passages through the Pentateuch that will enhance our ability to understand the whole.

Whenever I teach in an old European capital, like Prague or Kiev or Sarajevo, there is almost always a river running through it. Rivers were the highways of the old world. There is also usually a square with a guy on a horse, except for Ljubljana, they have a poet and are very proud of the fact. Each city has monuments that the locals want to show you. Along with the historic statues and buildings, there is the bustle of life, a large outdoor market, massive apartment blocks with schools and factories and banks scattered throughout.

In a big city it takes time to get to know the ins and outs of all the neighborhoods with the various streets and shops. And I imagine that is true for you with the Pentateuch. When you go to the Pentateuch, you have your favorite places to visit, places you have been before, maybe the Creation story, maybe the ten plagues, maybe the spies going into the promise land. There is a good chance it's a narrative section of the Pentateuch. But there are some more pedestrian places that might not excite you. Maybe you have just walked through them, the genealogies, the tabernacle furniture, most of Leviticus. I want to help you become more familiar with all that you might encounter in the Pentateuch. I want to take you to a few places where you may never have spent much time. There is a river that runs through the whole. That will help us keep our bearings. It is the river of God's commitment to his own promises. His commitment to his gracious plan of redemption in spite of his people's repeated faithlessness. We will also visit some major monuments with a focus on monuments to grace. We will uncover some of the cultural spots that give insight into the thought and life of the times. And since I get to be the tour guide, I will also take you to a few of my favorite out of the way places. We will not see everything. We do not have the time in this visit. But that is okay, because we are going to see a lot, and my goal is to motivate you to come back regularly on your own.

We will have four or five lessons per book with a couple extra at the beginning because Genesis is so foundational. We will start in this lesson with Genesis 1, but before we do that, I want to go over a major motif that will help us with the culture of the Pentateuch, and then I want to go over some background details about the Pentateuch as a work of literature. And then we will get into Genesis 1.

The Kingdom Motif

First, the kingdom motif. The kingdom motif will be a consistent background model or idea for us as we study through the Pentateuch. It will help us understand aspects of Old Testament thought and the thought of the Ancient Near East.

Kingdom is a recurring motif through the Bible. Mark introduces the ministry of Jesus in 1:14-15, writing that Jesus came "preaching the gospel of God, and saying, 'The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel.'" Later Jesus taught his disciples to pray this way, "Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name, thy kingdom come..." Jesus speaks about the kingdom both as a present reality and a future reality. This already, but not yet sense of the kingdom fits with the two comings of Jesus. He already reigns from heaven. And he will come again to fully establish his reign over a new heaven and a new earth.

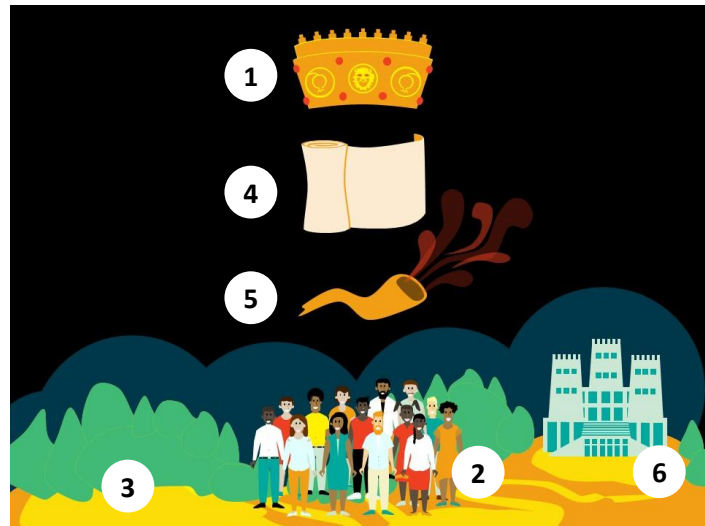
David recognizes that his kingdom is a reflection or perhaps a vassal state of a much greater kingdom. He praises God in Psalm 145:11-12, this way,

They shall speak of the glory of Your kingdom
And talk of Your power;
To make known to the sons of men your mighty acts
And the glory of the majesty of Your kingdom.

David sees God as the king of a great kingdom.

Our kingdom motif has six elements, six things you would expect to have in order to have kingdom. What do you think those six things are? What are the basic elements of kingdom? You might want to pause the audio here and see how many you can come up with. What do you need to have to have kingdom?

The two most basic elements are (1) a king and (2) a people. Some students say an army, but I am counting that in with the people, king and a people. So, what else do we need? We need (3) a land, that is an environment or a place where the people will live. We also need (4) a covenant that will define the relationship between the king and his people. Covenant is not only a biblical idea. A covenant between a great king and a lesser kingdom was called a suzerain-vassal treaty in the Ancient Near East. It was a common type of legal agreement with a fixed form. We will talk more about suzerain-vassal treaty or covenant in our next lesson. For now, it is enough to recognize that kingdom and covenant go together. So, we have a king, a people, a land, and a covenant. That's four elements. We also need (5) a mediator, because no self-respecting great king is going to communicate the requirements of a treaty himself. He communicates through a mediator. And finally, we need (6) a palace. Which, in the case of God or a god, would be called a temple. In fact, the Hebrew word for temple comes from a much older Sumerian word that literally means "big house." A temple is a house for a god. That's why in the Ancient Near East, it would be ridiculous to have a temple with no idol in it. The point of the temple is that it houses the god.



These are our six elements: king, people, covenant, mediator, land, and temple. We could trace each of these elements as an important theological theme through the Pentateuch. We could look at the temple theme or trace the importance of the land. Each will come up as we move along in our series. We will especially give focus to the idea of covenant as a definition of the relationship between God, the great king, and man, his vassal people. So, our special focus is on king, people, and covenant.

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Pentateuch Background Details

Author

Before we move into Genesis, I want you to know where I am coming from regarding the background details of the Pentateuch as a book, such as the author, title, date and audience.

One of my favorite professors in seminary was Dr. Jeffrey Niehaus. He had a significant influence on me, introducing me to Ancient Near Eastern cultural and theological backgrounds of the Bible. He recently put out a three-volume biblical theology, the first volume came out in 2014. I have not read it, but just from looking at a synopsis of the books, I see that I received much of the content in his classes.

I really liked that at times Dr. Niehaus would share with us some of his own walk with Jesus. He came to faith during the last month of receiving his doctorate from Harvard in English poetry. He then started over, getting his Master's in theology and moving to England to pursue a doctorate in Old Testament studies. Dr. Niehaus had two readers, both of whom must sign off on his doctoral work in order for him to receive his degree. In his dissertation, Dr. Niehaus argued that Moses wrote the first five books of the Bible. But one of his official readers required him to give equal credit to the opposing documentary hypothesis which argues that the text of the Pentateuch comes from four schools of writers referred to as J, E, D and P. If you ever heard of JEDP, that's referring to the documentary hypothesis, and it is rejecting Mosaic authorship. Holding to Mosaic authorship and not willing to give equal support to the documentary hypothesis, Dr. Niehaus was refused his doctorate. All that work was rejected because he held to Mosaic authorship. Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary hired him anyway. He did have a doctorate from Harvard after all, and I am sure they appreciated his biblical stance.

I bring up Dr. Niehaus for three reasons. First, I want you to be aware of one of the major influences on the teaching you will get in this series. I am always trying to interpret faithfully the text of the Bible. At the same time, we all have teachers who help us and influence us. I'll post a bibliography at observetheword.com to give other acknowledgements. Second, I want you to know that I am familiar with the documentary hypothesis, even though we are not going to spend any time on it. And third, I want to communicate to you that I reject the assumptions of the documentary hypothesis, believing with Dr. Niehaus and the vast majority of evangelical scholarship through the ages with the biblical assertion that Moses is the author of the first five books of the Bible. So, all that just to say, "Moses wrote it." Moses is the author.

Title

Recognizing Moses as the author of the Pentateuch helps us understand the title, date and audience. The Jewish title for these five books is Torah, which is usually translated in English as law. So, when we get past these first five books and later authors refer back to them, like Joshua does in 8:31, he writes, "as it is written in the book of the law of Moses," the word law there is the Hebrew word Torah. Of course, that word means much more than just the dos and don'ts, the commandments of law. It encapsulates all the material included from Genesis to Deuteronomy. It is the instruction of Moses or the covenant of Moses, that is the Law of Moses.

The word Pentateuch is a Greek word meaning five scroll work. This helps us to remember that the first five books of the Bible, while operating as separate books, also operate as a unified whole, a series of five books. A survey of the Pentateuch, like we are attempting, is a great place to consider the larger unity of the whole. We are moving quickly enough in order to keep the big picture of God's promises in mind. As far as the title goes, I will try to stick with Pentateuch, but may use Torah or books of Moses or books of the Law all to mean the same thing, the first five books of the Bible.

Date

Rather than argue a precise timeline for the Pentateuch, I suggest to you an easy to remember timeline. It is approximate, but extremely helpful. Think of Abraham at 2000 BC, Moses at 1500 BC, and David at 1000 BC. 2000, 1500, 1000, how easy is that? Abraham, Moses and David. And Jesus came at 0, and we are on the other side at 2000 AD. Simple.

Audience

Having defined the author, title, and date, that leaves us with the audience. This is one of the first principles of good Bible study. We do not want to jump in and start interpreting the Pentateuch as though Moses had us primarily in mind. The most basic meaning of the text is generally going to be the meaning that the author intended his audience to receive. Who was the audience?

Usually, someone answers by saying, "God's people" or "Israel." That's on the right track but not specific enough. Which Israel? Who were the real people who first received this five-scroll work from Moses? The next answer I get tends to be the Israelites who came out of Egypt. That is closer. But most of them died in the desert before Deuteronomy was written. The first audience to receive the Pentateuch was the second generation of Israelites to have come out of Egypt. It was the second generation as they were camped on the wrong side of the Jordan river faced with the decision of whether or not they would be faithful where their parents' generation had been unfaithful. Will we trust God and enter the land?

Moses knows that he is not going to enter the land. He has done his best to prepare Joshua to take up the mantle of leadership. And now he has written the book of the Law for these people, for this generation. They have three big picture questions they need answered. (1) Who is our God? (2) Who are we? (3) What is our mission? This is what Moses needs them to know. We can ask these same three questions from an individual point of view. (1) Who is my God? (2) Who am I? (3) What is my mission? These are the questions that this second generation out of Egypt needed answered in order to walk faithfully with God. These are also the questions that we need answered for our generation if

we are to walk faithfully with God. We start with this second generation out of Egypt, but there is going to be relevance to us.

So, let's get started.

Genesis Overview

Each time we start a new book in this series, I'll give you a basic outline or structure for the book. For Genesis, I am using Bruce Wilkinson's *Talk Through the Bible* outline. Its simplicity is very nice. We divide the book into two parts. Chapters 1-11 cover four events, and chapters 12-50 cover four people. The four events deal with all humanity while the four people deal with one family. The events are Creation, Fall, Flood and Nations. That's Genesis 1-11 and all of humanity. The four people are Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Joseph. That's Genesis 12-50 and one family.

Genesis: Kingdom Prologue							
Key Passage: 12:2-3							
Chapters 1-11: Four Events				Chapters 12-50: Four People			
Creation	Fall	Flood	Nations	Abraham	Isaac	Jacob	Joseph
All humanity				One family			
Common Grace Kingdom				Special Grace Kingdom			

To get a nice overview of Genesis in your mind, I also recommend the Bible Project overview videos. They are great. In fact, when I teach this course in a classroom setting, I stop talking at this point and have the class watch the first Genesis video which covers chapters 1-11. You can do that if you want to. Stop now and watch the video. The Bible Project really handles the biblical literature well. For your convenience, I have posted all of the Pentateuch videos from the Bible Project on the resource page of our website at observetheword.com. So, if you want to see a short overview video, go to observetheword.com and watch Genesis, part 1.

We are beginning with the beginning and are just going to address chapter 1 and the first story of Creation. As we look at the text, we will focus on the three big picture questions. (1) Who is our God? (2) Who are we? (3) And what is our mission?

Genesis 1:1-2:3

(1) *Who is our God?*

Genesis 1:1,

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.

That sums up the whole story. It's not unusual for biblical literature to give us a layered approach to a narrative where the story does not unfold simply linearly, but successive accounts overlap one another. Genesis 1 and 2 is an example. The story of Genesis 1 ends a little into chapter 2 at verse 3 with the seven days and God resting. Genesis 2 does not pick up after day 7 but starts by giving focus to days 3 and 6 when God first brought forth vegetation and then created man. Then perhaps we are to understand the rest of chapter 2 being completed on day 6 or the rest of the process takes more than a day and so the story moves forward. In either case, the Genesis 2 narrative doesn't follow but overlaps with the Genesis 1 narrative, giving us additional information with a different emphasis.

Perhaps that is how we should understand 1:1. In this first verse, we are given the whole story. God created heaven and the earth. It is a summary statement that also serves as an introduction. Genesis 1:2 and following does not take place after Genesis 1:1 but gives us more information about the creation described in Genesis 1:1. We would then ask, "How did God create heaven and earth or what do we need to know about the creation of heaven and earth?"

Verse 2 is the point where we are picking up the story. God has already created a watery mass to work with.

Genesis 1:2,

The earth was formless and void, and darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was moving over the surface of the waters.

Water in the Ancient Near East was a symbol of chaos. This comes out strongly in the flood narrative in which God saves Noah's family through the waters of judgment. In fact, ancient cultures may have viewed water as chaos because of a common memory of the flood. But there was this theme in ancient literature. Here the waters are described as formless and void with the Spirit of God moving over them. Moses will later make a literary link to the phrase "the Spirit of God was moving [or hovering] over the surface." That same Hebrew word shows up in the song of Moses in Deuteronomy 32:11 where Moses describes God as a majestic bird watching over Israel, "Like an eagle that stirs up its nest, that hovers over its young, he spread his wings and caught them, he carried them on his pinions." The vision of the Spirit of God hovering as creator and as protector occurs here at the beginning of the Pentateuch and then at the end of the Pentateuch. It's a really nice literary link suggesting the unity of five books from beginning to end.

So, we start with this image of God the Spirit hovering over the formless waters. In verse 1 he created something out of nothing. Now he is continuing the process of creation with the additional idea of bringing order out of chaos.

Then we get the first day.

Genesis 1:3–5,

³ Then God said, "Let there be light"; and there was light. ⁴ God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness. ⁵ God called the light day, and the darkness He called night. And there was evening and there was morning, one day.

Now we have light.

The beginning of this story is telling us about our God. Our God is the one who creates something out of nothing, who brings order into chaos, who calls light to shine into the darkness. That's our God. And scholars recognize that elements of this story oppose Ancient Near East creation myths. There is no description here of God needing the creation. There is no Leviathan, no monster of chaos. There is no battle between gods to bring it about. The earth does not come out of the body of a god or a monster, like in all those other stories. Nothing exists prior to God's action in verse 1. And though some rejection of false ancient worldviews is likely present in the background of our Genesis story, it is left in the background. This story is not focusing on the false narratives but on giving us a true narrative that teaches us about our God.

We learn that God exists before the creation of anything. We learn that God brings the physical world into being. We learn that order and light come from God. We also learn that what God makes is good. In verse 4 God looks at the light, and he calls it good. That will be repeated every day. Everything that God makes is a reflection of him and is therefore good. What God makes is good.

While rejecting ancient myths, this story also rejects a modern myth. God does not arise out of human consciousness. Human consciousness comes to be because of God. Likewise, moral good is not a social structure. It is not defined by human culture and conventions. It comes out of the nature of God. Good is defined by who God is. Would God be God if there were never any humans around to experience him or worship him? Absolutely. He is not at all defined by us. We are defined by him. So, we can ask, "Who are we? According to this story who are we?" Let's consider that as we read on.

(2) *Who are we?*

In day 1 we have light. Let's read the rest of the story, all 7 days, from Genesis 1:6 – 2:3. And as we read, pay attention to what is created on each day, and see if you can detect the pattern. There is, of course, the linear seven-day pattern, but there is another pattern to the days that goes along with that. See if you catch it.

Let's read Genesis 1:6-2:3. **[Read Genesis 1:6-2:3.]**

The first pattern of the days is the list of seven. So, we all know that. We are familiar with the idea that there are seven days of creation. There is a second pattern in there. And that pattern is a parallel pattern. So, days 1-3 are set parallel to days 4-6. Day 1 and 4 go together, then day 2 and 5 and then day 3 and 6. Let's think about what God does on each of the days. In the first three days, God creates the environment. In second set of three days he is going to populate the environment. So, God created light on the first day. He separated the waters to create sky and sea on the second day. He separates the waters again on the third day to bring forth land with vegetation. These are our environments, or we could say our kingdoms, our realms.

Day 4 parallels days 1 in which God created light and separated it from darkness by populating the realm of light with the sun and the moon and the stars. Day 5 parallels day 2 on which God separated sky and sea by populating sky and sea with birds and fish. Day 6 parallels day 3 on which God separated dry land from the water by populating that dry land with animals.

The primary way an author communicates meaning is through words, phrases, and sentences. An author also communicates meaning through style and structure. In this case, the parallel structure of the days communicates to us the creation of an environment in which mankind will live, but not only live, mankind is going to reign. God creates the environment, then he populates the environment, crowning that population with the creation of man. We are learning about ourselves. God is defining us. Let's read again 1:26-28. It's about us.

Genesis 1:26–28

²⁶ God said, "Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness; and let them rule over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the sky and over the cattle and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth." ²⁷ God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them. ²⁸ God blessed them; and God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth, and subdue it; and rule over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the sky and over every living thing that moves on the earth."

What do we learn about ourselves? Most importantly we learn that we are created in the image of God. This is where the intrinsic value of the human being comes from. If human rights is not just a completely made up concept, where does it come from? How do we ground it? How do we say that human beings are valuable and that they have certain rights that we should pay attention to? We are unique and valuable because God has made us in his image.

This is the basis for equality between men and women. Verse 17 says, "God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them." As equals. The modern world, especially in the West, holds this principle to be self-evident. But is it? History suggest that it is not self-evident. History promotes the view that a certain class or race or gender is better, smarter, more valuable. That is the way cultures have acted throughout time. The secular worldview has no ultimate ground for the claim of equality. No ultimate ground for the claim of value. We sense it to be right in our cultures that little boys and little girls have equal value, equal worth. What is our basis for that? Well, Genesis 1:27, we are made in the image of God, male and female he made them in his image. This is why we argue the value of human life, regardless of race, regardless of gender, from the womb to hospice, each human being bears the intrinsic value of being made in God's image.

Being in God's image means that we are moral beings. This comes out through the Pentateuch. The basis for the Law of Moses is that we should be holy because our God is holy. That is who he is. What he

creates is good, good, good, very good. So, we should be, too. This is part of our uniqueness in the animal realm, even if it has been polluted by the fall of man and twisted. It is still in us and shines out at times. Along with this sense of morality, we share also in God's rationality and in God's creativity. He has made us able to observe the world, to think about it, to appreciate beauty, and to desire to create.

Something that may not come out here explicitly, but I think comes out in Scripture, particularly in the New Covenant concept of the body of Christ, is how we are meant to reflect or give image to the nature of God as trinity, to God as three-in-one, to the communal nature of God. C. S. Lewis described a wonderful truth about the mystery of the trinity in his book *Mere Christianity*. 1 John 4:8 says, "The one who does not love does not know God, for God is love." When we say that "God is love", there is a very interesting truth that accompanies the Christian mystery of God as three in one. Because God is one, it is possible to say that he is self-existent. He depends on no one for anything. He has always been, and he always will be. He is uniquely the first. But if God was merely one then that would mean love was not actually possible until God created someone to love. God must lack the experience of love until he creates. And so, God has a need, if he wants to love. In order to love, he must create.

But that is not true for the biblical concept of God. He is one. But according to the biblical mystery, he is also three. And among the three the Father has always loved the Son and the Son has always loved the Father and so also the Spirit. We do not have to say God values love or God desires love or God imagines love or God created love. We can say, "God is love", and in that we mean that he has always loved. He has never lacked love.

So now, how does a single individual reflect, like Adam, reflect the image God as love. Now, I guess a single individual could reflect God's image by loving God. But I believe that God's intention in creating human partnership between a man and a woman, among a family, among a community, such as the body of Christ, his intention is that we might show off the image of God by loving one another. God created man, he created him male and female, to image his love by loving.

There is one more way revealed here that human beings are to be like God. They are to reign over the earth. That brings up our kingdom motif. It is here in the first chapter of Genesis, this idea of kingdom. God the great king has created a kingdom for his vassals Adam and Eve for them to live in and to rule in. They are to be King and Queen. That leads us to our third question, "What is our mission?"

(3) And what is our mission?

The original mission of Adam and Eve here is to be fruitful, fill the earth, rule over it, subdue it. And they are to do this as a reflection of the image of God on earth. And it does not mean that the earth and animals are created for the whim of man, to be used up and abused. It does mean that the creation is subservient to man. It is wrong to emphasize the need to care for our environment to such a degree that the earth and the animals are given equal or more value than man. The earth and the animals are the environment in which we live. On the other hand, we do have a responsibility to care for the environment God has entrusted to us in a manner that we imagine God would want us to care for it.

God is the great king who rules over all. He has now created an environment for mankind to thrive in as his vassals. Adam and Eve are lesser rulers, stewards of the realm God has given into their hands. We can imagine God's intention that Adam and Eve would rule benevolently as his representatives. It sounds like it is going to take some work, to multiply, fill, subdue and rule. God has given them real responsibility with the intention that as their rule spreads over creation the glory of God is to be manifested to the heavenly realms.

That mission will be affected by the fall of man in chapter 3. We are going to have to ask, "How does this change after the fall?", but a sense of it is maintained for Israel. They are still to flourish on the earth as a reflection of the God they worship. So, when we get to Exodus on Mt. Sinai, God will say to Israel, "you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation (19:6)." They are still supposed to

be holy, to reflect his goodness. They are to be holy. Priests are to reflect the goodness of God and bring others into right relationship with him. And then later, God will say to the second generation out of Egypt in Deuteronomy chapter 4 that they are to live out the law as a witness to the surrounding nations (4:6). They are supposed to see how you live and be attracted to your God.

This continues to be our mission. Doesn't it? We have an awesome God who shines light into the darkness and brings order out of chaos. And we are to join in that work, living out his image as a witness to his glory. We were made for this to reflect him. So, as the moon reflects the glory of the sun, which is not its own, but shines brightly out, so too we are created to reflect the glory of God. That's who he is. That's who we are. That's our mission.

Reflection Questions

1. What stands out to you as you read Genesis 1:1-2:3? What do you notice as interesting or important or strange or confusing? What questions come to mind?
2. What repetition stands out to you in the sequence of days? There is more than one kind of repetition. What point might Moses want to make by repeating or restating the same or similar facts and ideas?
3. Who is God? In what way does Genesis 1 rebuke or correct or affirm the religious or secular worldview of your society regarding the nature of God? What is important for people to know about who God truly is?
4. Who are we? In what way does Genesis 1 rebuke or correct or affirm the religious or secular worldview of your society regarding the nature of people? What is important for people to know about who we are as human beings? What are real or potential consequences for a society that rejects this understanding of human beings?
5. What's our mission? In what way does Genesis 1 rebuke or correct or affirm the religious or secular worldview of your society regarding human purpose? Why is it important for people to know they have a purpose? And what stands out to you about the purpose communicated here in Genesis 1?
6. Why does God make a point to rest on the seventh day? What does this communicate about God's creative work? What might the point be for people?

Lesson 2: Genesis 2, Creation, part 2

The Generations of Heaven and Earth

Genesis chapter 2 is not a second or different story from Genesis chapter 1. It is a continuation of that first story. Or we could say an expansion on the story to focus in on the creation of man and woman. We were told more generally in Genesis 1 that God created man, he created him male and female and he created him in his own image. Now Moses takes us back into that sixth day to learn more about this man and woman God has made.

The chapter division is not perfect. The first story ends at 2:3 with God sanctifying the seventh day and declaring a blessing over all that he has made. The second chapter of this story really picks up in Genesis 2:4.

Let's start by noticing a couple of words that may or may not show up in your translation of that first verse.

In my Bible, 2:4 starts off, "This is the account of the heavens and earth..." That phrase "this is the account of" is literally, "these are the generations of," or it could be, "this is the genealogy of." We will meet the word again many times in Genesis. The next time is going to be in 5:1, "This is the book of the generations of Adam." The word makes a lot more sense when used with a human being. The generations of a person are the descendants who follow that person. Here in 2:4 Moses is using the word stylistically to refer to the creation. The generations of heaven and earth are the story of heaven and earth. A close look at Genesis shows us that Moses uses this phrase to structure the whole book.

We are using a simpler structure in Genesis. This is the one we explained in our last lesson where chapters 1-11 cover four events with a focus on all humanity: Creation, Fall, Flood, and Nations. Chapters 12-50 cover four people with a focus on a special family: Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph. We are in that first event section, the Creation.

Genesis: Kingdom Prologue							
Key Passage: 12:2-3							
Chapters 1-11: Four Events				Chapters 12-50: Four People			
Creation	Fall	Flood	Nations	Abraham	Isaac	Jacob	Joseph
All humanity				One family			
Common Grace Kingdom				Special Grace Kingdom			

If we were to go slower and do a more detailed study of Genesis, this word generations (in Hebrew it's toledot), his word would stand out to us. It is possible Moses had available to him tablets with written genealogical records which he incorporated into Genesis. And this phrase, "These are the generations of," may have been used as an introductory or as a closing statement on those tablets which had lists of descendants. In Genesis, Moses uses 10 genealogical lists. Moses uses the phrase and following genealogy as an introduction to a new section of the narrative. Not all the genealogies are as important as others. The genealogy of Ishmael is not as important as the genealogy of Terah, Abraham's father but that may be explained by the fact that Moses wanted 10, which is a nice round, important number for sectioning off the whole book.

So, this is where you would find them. There is no use of the word in chapter 1:1-2:3, and then we get the first use in 2:4...

תּוֹלְדוֹת (*tô·lē·dôṭ*): genealogy

1. Introduction 1:1—2:3

2. The generations of heaven and earth 2:4—4:26

3. The generations of Adam 5:1—6:8

4. The generations of Noah 6:9—9:29
5. The generations of Shem, Ham, and Japheth 10:1—11:9
6. The generations of Shem 11:10-26
7. The generations of Terah 11:27—25:11
8. The generations of Ishmael 25:12-18
9. The generations of Isaac 25:19—35:29
10. The generations of Esau 36:1-43
11. The generations of Jacob 37:1—50:26

That is just to give you an overview of how the word is used throughout the book. We are still right here at the very first one, still at the generations of the heaven and earth.

Our Questions, Not Theirs

In the day

Genesis 2:4 continues, “These are the generations of heaven and earth when they were created, in the day that the Lord God made earth and heaven.”

This second part of the creation narrative in 2:4 starts very similarly to how we began the first part in 1:1. There is this broad statement about the creation of the whole universe, the heavens and the earth, and then a more specific focus. In chapter 2 that specific focus is going to be on Adam and Eve. Talking about Adam and Eve and the creation of the world brings up our modern questions of evolution and the earth’s age. The modern worldview that we interact with creates the questions that we want answered. Moses interacted with a different set of questions which his audience was faced with. He had to combat the worldviews and mythologies of the Egyptians, the Canaanites, the Hittites and the Old Empire Babylonians. Whereas, we have to address new discoveries in science, secularism, modern paganism, new age spiritualism, our questions and problems overlap, but not always. Since Moses did not write to address problems with the age of the earth or evolution, those were not his problems. I do not want to spend a lot of time on those questions myself. That is not the focus of this story in Genesis chapter 2. Still, there is information for us here. And this are big questions for us. So, I am going to give some recommendations, and then I am going to move on.

Let’s start still in 2:4 with a second word that may or may not be translated in you Bible version. It is an important word for this discussion. The text says, “In the day that God made the earth and heaven.” The important word is day. Some Bible translations just say, “When God created the earth and heaven” without using the word day, but it is there in the Hebrew. It is interesting that chapter 1 describes the heavens and earth being made in 7 days, while this verse says, “in the day that God made the earth and heaven.” Here it is a singular day. How are we to understand the difference?

God defines the word day for us Genesis chapter 1 in verse 5. “God called the light day, and the darkness he called night.” Day in chapter one has a morning and an evening. A day there looks like a 24-hour period. There are some interesting observations to make, like, “What does it mean to have a day before the sun is created on day 4? That is interesting. But the narrative is pretty clear, there is an evening and a morning, a day. When it is light it is day, when it is dark it is night. We are supposed to read the days as days in chapter 1 and the day as an age or period of time in 2:4. And that is not a problem that is pretty much the straightforward reading of the text. And it makes the most sense. That does not mean that the interpretation will be the most straightforward interpretation or that there will not be meaning that is not straightforward. As we saw in our last lesson, the author intends us to recognize both a linear 7 days and a parallel pattern to the days. But the idea that it is being framed around literal days, that’s sort of obvious.

One thing we do know. Is that we have such a small amount of information here in regard to the creation of the world. There is so much I would like to know that I am just not told. So, I don’t want to focus on what I don’t know. I want to focus on what I can know. So, here some recommendations on what to keep in mind, considering the age of the earth and evolution while reading the Genesis history.

The Age of the Earth and Evolution

(1) Number 1: this story and the rest of the Bible do not allow for human evolution. Theistic evolution is not compatible with the Bible. First, our value as human beings is based on our having been created by God in his image. Second, the universality of both the problem of sin through the first Adam and the solution of atonement through the second Adam Jesus Christ depends on the reality of a sinless Adam and Eve who broke faith with God. You can see that point specifically in Romans 5:12-21, that is Paul's whole argument. When the Bible speaks about Adam and Eve, about human origins, where evil comes from, how the atonement works, the Bible treats Adam and Eve just as historical as it treats Jesus and the cross. The argument that God used evolution to create humankind requires a loose reading, even rejection, of certain biblical texts. And that's a slippery slope to start down.

(2) Number 2: The age of the earth is not as clear cut and dry as evolution. There are little things in the text that lead us to wonder and ask questions. Opposing sides both have answers for the perceived problems. I am only going to say here that the text allows some interesting observations. I am not even going to tell you what my opinion is. What I do not think we should do is bow under the pressure of a modern secular world view. Science does not define for us our view of origins or creation. If you believe in an old earth because you believe that science has more authority than the Bible, you have a problem. If God chose to create in 7 days he is certainly able to create in 7 days. What version of God doesn't believe that God could create in 7 days? And so, our determination about whether he did or not starts with revelation not with science. God's revelation has higher authority. And science is not so good with origins anyway. That is not the primary role of science. Which brings me to my third point.

(3) Number 3: Science claims to have the final say on truth. And many modern people give science that credit. There are lots of problems with that. Here are three problems with this. First, the truth statement that science is the best way to the truth about the world is not itself a scientific statement. That is a philosophical statement. To claim that science is the best way to give truth, that's not a claim that can be proven by science. So, you are having to trust something else for giving you the truth that undergirds your opinions about science, something besides science. It is a philosophical statement. So then, you have to come back to, "Where are you getting that truth from? Where are you getting your claims about science from?" The answer tends to be that we get it from our worldview or from our society. We do not actually have good, sound philosophical or logical reasoning for the claims that we make about science. Certainly, science cannot give us those claims.

Second, good science is not always accurate. Scientists know that. That is the history of science. Science is a history of theories that give way to better theories. Science is supposed to be tentative.

Third, scientific theorizing that does not practice the scientific method is not on the same level as science that is backed up by the use of the scientific method. The scientific method relies on coming up with a theory that makes truth claims which can then be tested through experimentation. Questions about origins and evolution resist verification through experimentation. We would need millions of years to run the experiments in order to verify most of the theories about origins and evolution. And just because science is really good at one thing, such as using the scientific method to experiment on our present day reality, that does not mean science is good at other things. That is the mistake that often gets made. Science is not necessarily good at theorizing about historical origins of the world and the human race. Science shines when it's using the scientific method to prove theories that can be tested, that's why we have refrigeration and iPhones and have been to the moon. But claims about origins and evolution have moved out of the verifiable realm of science, which employs the scientific method, into the realm of historical or philosophical science. It is a theoretical realm of science. We need to be aware of that and regard those theories much, much more tentatively.

(4) Number 4: Science does not work when it bumps up against a creative miracle. Imagine that you were at a wedding, sipping wine, and it occurred to you that the wine you were sipping was the best

wine you ever tasted in your life. You ask the friend beside you, “How old do you think this wine is?” That friend happens to be a scientist and he brought his handy, portable lab with him. So, he runs a test on the wine right there and he says, “It is 12 years old. Science does not lie. I can tell you this is 12-year old wine.” At which point a third friend says, “Woah, woah, woah, you’ve got it wrong. Just one hour ago that wine was water. And then that man over there, see that guy over there surrounded by 12 other guys, he changed that water into the best wine I ever tasted.”

The problem with a creative miracle is that as soon as God creates something from nothing it has implied history. The newly created thing enters into the realm of space and time and is now subject to the laws of science, but science has no way of knowing the thing just come to be. Imagine you are a scientist, and you are there on the 6th day of creation. Let’s suppose Adam was created as a young man. And you ask the scientist, “How old is that guy?” The scientist might respond, “I can run a test, but from first glance, I’d say 21 or 22.” And then he could test Adam. And he could use really good science to test. And he could affirm his dating. But he would be completely wrong. The same thing happens when you wait for night to fall on that day. And Adam asks, “How old do you think that star is, the one out there that seems to be the farthest away, it’s just barely flickering?” The scientist would need a way to test the distance of the star, but then he would be able to tell you how many millions of years it took light to get from that star to us, and that would give him the age of the star. Now that may be good science, it might be bad science, in this case, it is be irrelevant science. If God created the light to go along with the star he created, then both the star and the light, all the way from the star to the human eye on earth are only three days old.

And that is the problem with a creative miracle that science can’t know. If God creates something such that it comes to be and begins immediately to operate along with the laws of physics, then good science might determine the thing to be millions of years old whereas in reality it had only just been created.

And I know this question does not answer everything. It is more of a thought question. It is an illustration. I am suggesting to you that you start with God and his word. Science does not need to be an enemy of faith. Science often operates as an ally to the faith in the quest to glorify God through our ever-increasing wonder at what he has made. And yet, science has its limits.

What do we learn about the creation?

So, let’s move on from what we cannot know from this text to what we can know. For example, we are taught several significant truths about the creation itself. Moses helps our worldview come in line with God’s view of the world. Consider what we do learn.

The creation is not eternal. There was nothing. Then God made something.

The creation is not part of God. God is independent and distinct from what he has made. The creation is not his body. God is spirit, existing before the created world.

The created world was created good. The material world is not necessarily bad.

The created world is an environment made by God for people. People are more precious to God than the created world. The world is a gift. We are stewards of that gift. We are made in the image of God to reflect his rule over and care for the creation.

Now, turning our focus back to Genesis 2:4-25 and the creation of Adam and Eve, we learn more about our identity as human beings. So, let’s consider what we learn. As we go through the text, I am going to highlight four truths. These four truths have to do with work, covenant, intimacy, and gender.

Our Identity as human beings

We were created to work.

First, we were created to work. God has created the environment for man to live in, but he has not yet created man. Verses 5 and 6 describe for us the environment.

⁵ Now no shrub of the field was yet in the earth, and no plant of the field had yet sprouted, for the LORD God had not sent rain upon the earth, and there was no man to cultivate the ground.

⁶ But a mist used to rise from the earth and water the whole surface of the ground.

This text raises some questions for us, questions we can't really answer. But more importantly it sets the stage. We have land. And it is new land on which shrubs have not yet begun to grow. One thing especially is missing. Did you notice what that is? "There is no one to cultivate the earth." The environment is created for man and for the work of man, but he has not yet appeared. And then we have verse 7.

⁷ Then the LORD God formed man of dust from the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living being.

God creates man and in creating him, he connects man to the creation by creating him out of the the creation, out of the ground. At the same time, God connects man to himself by breathing life into him. That word for breath is the same as the word for spirit. So, it is the Spirit of God entering into man to bring him to life. In verse 19 the text describes God forming animals and birds also out of the ground. So, like man, in the same way, they are also connected to the inanimate creation. But the text only speaks of God breathing into Adam. He is unique. He is the one created in the image of God.

God created the land and vegetation for Adam, and he goes further to create an even more special environment for Adam. He makes a garden, which includes fruit trees. He is providing food for Adam. He is also modeling for Adam the work of cultivation that Adam is supposed to take up. This is 8-10.

⁸ The LORD God planted a garden toward the east, in Eden; and there He placed the man whom He had formed. ⁹ Out of the ground the LORD God caused to grow every tree that is pleasing to the sight and good for food; the tree of life also in the midst of the garden, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

So, we are told for the first time that there are two special trees. These are going to come up again in the next few verses along with more about the garden. Let's read that, verse 10-17.

¹⁰ Now a river flowed out of Eden to water the garden; and from there it divided and became four rivers. ¹¹ The name of the first is Pishon; it flows around the whole land of Havilah, where there is gold. ¹² The gold of that land is good; the bdellium and the onyx stone are there. ¹³ The name of the second river is Gihon; it flows around the whole land of Cush. ¹⁴ The name of the third river is Tigris; it flows east of Assyria. And the fourth river is the Euphrates. ¹⁵ Then the LORD God took the man and put him into the garden of Eden to cultivate it and keep it. ¹⁶ The LORD God commanded the man, saying, "From any tree of the garden you may eat freely; ¹⁷ but from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat from it you will surely die."

If the ancients were supposed to recognize the location of Eden by the naming of the rivers, then we have lost the knowledge they had. The 2nd generation out of Egypt would certainly recognize the two great rivers of Mesopotamia, the Tigris and Euphrates. You can find those on your Bible map or on Google Earth. But defining the other two rivers is really not possible. We can only make guesses. We have a guess of what Cush might be. But none work well. The land is very good, both fertile and full of beautiful stones and gold. Verse 15 tells us that God does not seem himself as Adam's gardener. God assigns Adam the role of cultivating the garden. And we expected from verse 5. We were waiting for somebody to come and cultivate it. And in verse 16 we also get the one prohibition made to Adam. He may eat of any tree, presumably that includes the tree of life. But he may not eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

So, what are we learning about ourselves? We were created to work. This is where that satisfaction comes from when we use our energy and abilities to do something worthwhile. We were created for that. We need this. Adam was made to cultivate the earth. God invited Adam into that work, creating

an environment in which his labor might be fruitful, and God even modelling for him the work to be done. In a minute we will see God inviting Adam into contact with the animals, to name them, which suggests both authority over animals and also knowledge of animals.

We were created in covenant with God.

There is something else here that we might not pick up on, but I believe Moses' audience would have noticed. We have here part of the covenant form that will be developed later, especially when we get to Exodus and Deuteronomy. So, we are created to be in covenant with God. This is part of our background kingdom motif. Remember the six things we need to have to have kingdom. We need a king and a people, a covenant and a mediator, a land and a palace or a temple, the place where the great king lives. We have all of these here. God is the king. Adam is the people or the beginning of the people. Adam will also be the mediator of the covenant, expected to communicate to Eve and to their descendants, their children. We have the land, newly created. And we have a temple in that Eden is our temple. It is the place that Adam and Eve experience the presence of God. We will see this temple pattern followed with the tabernacle which is going to be created to look back towards Eden. I believe also we have the sixth element. We have covenant.



I am going to refer regularly in this series to both covenant and to suzerain-vassal treaty. When I do, I am talking about the treaty form used regularly in the 2nd Millennium in the Ancient Near East during the time of Abraham and Moses, used by the Egyptian, Hittite, and Old Babylonian empires. Great kings, or suzerains, made treaties with lesser kings, or vassals. We are going to get into some of the details of these later on in our series. Let me just introduce you to the basic form. Suzerain-vassal treaties of the 2nd Millennium contained these seven elements.

- 1 Title – the name or names of the great king and any titles he liked to go by.
 - 2 Historical Prologue – a statement about the king's historic relationship with this particular vassal people.
 - 3 Stipulations – these are the commandments, the dos and don'ts of the agreement.
 - a. basic (ie. assistance in war – both ways, taxes, etc...)
 - b. detailed
 - 4 Deposition and regular reading – where the treaty should be kept and how often read.
 - 5 Witnesses – this was usually a long list of gods.
 - 6 Blessings – what the king will do if covenant is kept.
 - 7 Curses – what the king will do if covenant is broken.
- (Ratified by a cutting of covenant ceremony – an Oath and sacrifice.)

We also have an oath, and this was not part of the written treaty. But it was an oath made by the vassal in conjunction with sacrifice. And so, covenants were not made. Covenants were cut. Because the sacrifice was a ratification. It is what made the covenant legal.)

We have most of the elements of covenant present in Genesis 1 and 2. The title Lord, God (which in Hebrew is Yahweh, Elohim) appears in 2:4. Chapter 1 and the summary statement of 2:4 about the creation of heaven and earth give us the historical prologue. That defines our relationship to this

point between the great King, God and his vassal person, Adam. Concerning stipulations, Adam is given several dos and only one do not. He is told positively in chapter 1 to be fruitful, multiply, fill the earth, subdue it, rule over the animal kingdom. God is the great king over all. He has given this land to his vassal Adam, and he expects Adam to rule as his steward. The one “do not” is in 2:17, “from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat.”

This is not a written covenant, so we do not have directions about a deposition or a regular reading. The element often left out of biblical covenant is the call of witnesses. Moses might figuratively call heaven and earth as witnesses. He does that in Deuteronomy. But he would certainly not follow the standard practice of calling gods and goddesses as witnesses. He had a statement of blessing in 2:3 when God blessed all that he has made. And we see him blessing Adam with the garden and later with Eve. There is also the assumed blessing of life through the tree of life. The curse for breaking covenant, on the other hand, is stated explicitly, “in the day that you eat from it you shall surely die.” And then finally, we do not have the cutting of covenant that involves a sacrifice and an oath. That will come later.

So, though Genesis 1 and 2 do not use directly use covenant language to describe relationship between God and Adam, we do see all these elements of a treaty form in Genesis. And then we are going to later get covenant language with Noah. This is significant for Adam, because God re-establishes covenant with Noah using language from Genesis 1. God says to Noah in 9:9, “I myself do establish my covenant with you, and with your descendants after you.” This followed right after God told Noah in 9:7, “And as for you, be fruitful and multiply; populate the earth abundantly and multiply in it.” So, the covenant with Noah appears to be a covenant renewal, which re-establishes a previous covenant made with Adam. It presumes the previous covenant.

Much, much later, Hosea uses covenant language in regard to Adam directly. Rebuking the northern kingdom of Israel, Hosea writes in 6:7, “But like Adam they have transgressed the covenant. They have dealt treacherously against me.” So, Hosea sees the fall in Genesis 3 as a transgression of covenant.

So, this is what we have seen so far. We as people have been created to work, and we have been created to be in covenant relationship with God. A third thing we can see is that we are also created for intimacy.

We are created for Intimacy.

God observes that something is missing. Let’s read 2:18-20.

¹⁸ Then the LORD God said, “It is not good for the man to be alone; I will make him a helper suitable for him.” ¹⁸ Then the LORD God said, “It is not good for the man to be alone; I will make him a helper suitable for him.” ¹⁹ Out of the ground the LORD God formed every beast of the field and every bird of the sky, and brought *them* to the man to see what he would call them; and whatever the man called a living creature, that was its name. ²⁰ The man gave names to all the cattle, and to the birds of the sky, and to every beast of the field, but for Adam there was not found a helper suitable for him.

This part of the story affirms Adams authority over the animals, but more importantly affirms his uniqueness apart from the animals and his need for human companionship. And of course, God was not surprised when none of the animals fit the bill. God knew that was going to happen. It was more for Adam to realize what was going on and for us to see that we truly are unique and different from animals. Moses tells us how God met the need in 2:21-25.

²¹ So the LORD God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and he slept; then He took one of his ribs and closed up the flesh at that place. ²² The LORD God fashioned into a woman the rib which He had taken from the man, and brought her to the man. ²³ The man said, “This is now bone of my bones, And flesh of my flesh; She shall be called Woman, Because she was taken out of Man.” ²⁴ For this reason a man shall leave his father and his mother, and be joined to his

wife; and they shall become one flesh.²⁵ And the man and his wife were both naked and were not ashamed.

In our last lesson, I mentioned that to fully reflect the image of God, there must be more than one human. God is love. God is in perfect fellowship as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. God created man to reflect him, and to do this fully, man needs someone to love, so that we can reflect the love of God. We also get the sense that Adam himself was not complete. He was in need. God makes us different from one another, but he also makes us complementary that we meet the needs one of another.

God has created mankind for relationship, and he provided marriage between man and woman as a foundational way for human beings to experience an intimate love that reflects godly love. The emphasis that Adam and Eve were naked and unashamed suggests more than just physical, it suggests an emotional nakedness or openness that was unique to their original state. It must have been wonderful. They were not emotionally flawed or wounded. They did not have low self-esteem or seek their value in each other. They did not fear judgment. They did not fear rejection. They were naked and unashamed. Their oneness was to be expressed physically through sex, but also more deeply in a oneness of emotional and spiritual connectedness.

That statement of verse 24 that a man shall leave his father and his mother and shall cleave to his wife highlights the need for a man and woman to separate from the relationship of their childhood, of their upbringing so they might develop fully as an adult in relationship with their spouse. This is looking ahead after Adam and Eve to their children. They are the mother and father that the first children are going to need to separate from. We also get the introduction of the most basic of social units. A society is as strong as the family. The family provides a healthy context where children can learn to worship God and to love people. The family is the basic context in society for the protection, nourishment, love, care, security, and growth of children. And so, the Bible is going to consistently teach that sex is for marriage. Because when you have children, you want them to be born into a family. And marriage is between a man and a woman because the purpose of the family is to raise up children. Children are supposed to come from this loving union and are supposed to be born into a family environment. That is the vision.

Included in that vision is the leadership role of the man. Marriages and families work best when the husband steps up as a leader, emotionally, spiritually and physically. God gives Adam a special leadership role in his relationship with Eve. We will see that leadership role held up as the expected model through the Bible.

I assume that an ancient person would notice immediately Adam's role as the firstborn. Paul later makes mention of this in 1 Timothy 2:13. The first born has a special authority in the family. Adam had that role. Adam also names Eve, and again suggesting to the ancient reader that he has special role. He does this both before the fall in 2:23 and then again after the fall in 3:20.

I have read one argument rejecting the idea that a husband has a role of leader on the grounds that this creates a power imbalance in relationship, and true love cannot exist where one person has authority. I think there is a point here. This has certainly been a problem, and it continues to be a problem in relationship between man and woman. However, as Christians, we must reject the basic assumption that if a person submits to another person there cannot be love. Our view of the trinity requires us to believe that it is possible for love to exist in a relationship between equals where one willingly submits to the authority of another. Jesus Christ, the Son, willingly submits to the Father (1 Corinthians 15:28). They are equals. And they share perfect love one to the other even while the Son submits to the leadership of the Father.

Man and woman were created to reflect the trinitarian love of God. We are created to be a partnership of equals. Genesis 1:27 says that both are in the image of God. We share equal value. Genesis 2:21 says that Eve was made out of a rib from Adam's side. She was not taken out of his head to rule over him, nor from his foot to be under him. Surely, we are to recognize that she is taken from his side to be his life partner. A wife is not a secretary. A wife is not a maid. A wife is a

partner. She is to complement the husband. And he is to complement her. And in that partnership, God has required the man to step up into a special role of leadership.

One final thing we learn about ourselves from Genesis 2. We learn that we are either created male or female.

We are male or female.

I don't think this needed to be a point 10 years ago. But it is increasingly becoming important in the modern world. Again, Genesis 1:27-28, "And God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. And God blessed them; and God said to them, 'Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth.'"

God has created human beings as male and female. Modern western society continues to oppose the idea of masculinity and femininity to the point of creating utter confusion. Adults, who want to break free from God and claim some sense of self-determination as the captain of their own soul, have not only claimed the right to reject biological fact, so that they might have this right of self-definition, but they are not content for that to just be true of them, but they want to hoist that awful burden of self-determination onto teenagers and even on children that we allow little children to tell us what they are. To define themselves. We are supposed to say, "We do not know what you are. You have to tell us what you are."

And that is just simply wrong. It is a huge burden to place on a child. We do not define ourselves. We can't define ourselves. God defines us. God has created us with purpose. He has created us in covenant with him. He has created us to have intimacy with other people. Male and female he has created us. Each one of us he has stamped with value and with dignity of being created in his image. We do not define our value. God defines our value. But that is not the end of the story. For us to be sober and honest about who we really are, there is wonderful, precious things about us, but we also have to acknowledge that we are deeply broken. And we can't know ourselves. We need someone to help us know who we are. And we are going to need someone to make us whole again. But we are not broken yet, that comes in the next chapter of our story. That is for our next lesson in Genesis 3.

Reflection Questions

1. What stands out to you as you read Genesis 2:4-25? What do you notice as interesting or important or strange or confusing? What questions come to mind?
2. How does recognizing God's intention for people to work affect how you see yourself? Can you relate to the idea that you are made for work or do you feel more like you are made for the weekend? If Adam is made for work in chapter 2, then what is the nature of the curse that comes in 3:17-19?
3. What stands out to you in regard to Adam's covenant relationship with God?
4. What stands out to you in regard to the intimacy to be shared between Adam and Eve and the instruction for future children to eventually separate from their parents? What does this say about husband and wife relationships? What does it say about the family?
5. How would you describe the tension between being made for work and being made for intimacy?
6. God has created humankind as male and female. How would you describe maleness or masculinity? How would you describe femaleness or femininity?

Lesson 3: Genesis 3-11, Fall, Flood, and Nations

Introduction

The Book of Genesis divides into two major parts. Part 1 is chapters 1-11 and it gives us our pre-history. The focus is on all of humanity with four major events: Creation, Fall, Flood and Nations. We took two lessons to cover Creation. In this lesson we are covering the rest, Fall, Flood, and Nations. That's a lot of ground to cover. The Fall sets up the whole narrative. The Flood and Nations describe the consequences of the Fall on all of humanity. So, we will focus in on text of Genesis 3 and then do a quick survey of the rest.

In Genesis 3, we start with the temptation of Adam and Eve and then move to the Judgement of Adam and Eve.

The Fall of Adam and Eve (Genesis 3)

The Temptation (3:1-7)

Let's read the story of the temptation. This is Genesis 3:1-7. **[Read Genesis 3:1-7]**

a. The Serpent speaks, verse 1

The story of Eve's temptation by the serpent is another example of a story where we would love to know more. Good observation of Genesis 3:1-7 raises a hundred questions. And once we have asked all of our questions, and we have done good observation, we then need to consider which of these are answerable in the text. The text has a purpose and a direction. And we are going to have to let go of some of our questions. Maybe they will be answered later by Moses or later in the Bible or maybe never at all. Letting go of some questions allows us to focus in on the questions that are answered by the text. What is Moses teaching us? What do we learn about ourselves, our world, our relationship to God?

We start with the serpent. Why a serpent? A lot of commentaries look for parallels in Babylonian and other ancient Near Eastern myths. And there are some parallels. But we have to ask ourselves how are we treating the story? Is this a new narrative that Moses created, so he was free to draw from pagan myths? Or is this an event that happened at the beginning of Creation? If this is a historical event, then we would be looking at parallels the wrong way around to think Babylonia influenced the choice of the serpent. The temptation of Eve came first. If there is any connection at all, it would go the other direction. Maybe ancient myths developed the serpent motif from the original event.

So, if it is not coming from the culture, why a serpent? I do not think that question is answerable. That would require getting into the mind of Satan. Which tells you what I think about the serpent. This is not explicit from the story. I am deducing this from the story. Serpents do not talk. And this serpent is particularly sinister. Though identified literally as a serpent, more is going on with this snake. I think the Devil's temptation in the wilderness of Jesus, the second Adam, parallels this temptation of the first Adam. Satan tried to ruin Jesus at the start of his ministry, just as he successfully undermined Adam and Eve at the start of theirs. I believe this is Satan somehow possessing the body of a snake.

More importantly for us than identifying the serpent is paying close attention to what the serpent says. Verse 1:

¹ Now the serpent was more crafty than any beast of the field which the LORD God had made. And he said to the woman, "Indeed, has God said, 'You shall not eat from any tree of the garden?'"

The serpent intentionally overstates the first question to Eve. Knowing full well that God has only made a limitation on one tree, he asks Eve whether God has forbidden the fruit of all trees. He is drawing Eve in, inviting her to make a response. With the word "indeed" or "really," however your Bible translates it, the serpent inserts an initial tone of doubt regarding the character of God. "Has God *really*," or "Has God *indeed* been so strict or unreasonable as to forbid all fruit?"

b. Eve Responds, verse 2

² The woman said to the serpent, “From the fruit of the trees of the garden we may eat; ³ but from the fruit of the tree which is in the middle of the garden, God has said, ‘You shall not eat from it or touch it, or you will die.’”

Eve repeats the command of God, which presumably she heard from Adam, with only one change. She adds the phrase, “or touch it.” That seems a harmless embellishment. Maybe that is how the command was communicated to her. We do not know what Adam told Eve. On the other hand, a regular feature of biblical narrative is the repetition of the exact words of a speaker with slight changes. And when that happens, we are supposed to notice it. Since the words of God are given just a few verses above and Eve repeats them almost word for word, I think we are supposed to notice that she adds in a little bit of her own. And what she adds agrees slightly with the tone the serpent. So, on the one hand she is defending God. “Not all trees, only one tree.” On the other hand, she acknowledges that this one command is rather strict, “Not only are we not to eat that fruit, we are not even to touch it.”

c. The serpent speaks again, verses 4-5

⁴ The serpent said to the woman, “You surely will not die! ⁵ For God knows that in the day you eat from it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.”

Here he right out denies the word of God by casting God’s motives in a negative light. It is a cunning lie. He is painting the fruit as desirable. And makes it even more desirable questioning God’s intent. It is a classic temptation technique. “He just doesn’t want you to have what he has. He is just trying to keep you under control.” And Eve gives in. She believes it. And she acts.

d. Eve acts, verse 6

⁶ When the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was desirable to make *one* wise, she took from its fruit and ate; and she gave also to her husband with her, and he ate.

Eve believed the serpent. She believes she will not die. And she believes that God is keeping something good from her. So, she eats. And she gives some to Adam, and he eats. Which is a surprise because we now realize that Adam is right there with her. It does not say when he shows up. I think we are to assume he was there all along, passively observing. He says nothing. He does nothing. He is just there, and he eats.

And there are immediate consequences.

e. Immediate Consequences, verse 7.

⁷ Then the eyes of both of them were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made themselves loin coverings.

Satan told this one truth. Their eyes would be opened. And their eyes are opened. There is a play on words between Hebrew word *arum* (עָרוֹם) or shrewd in 3:1, and the Hebrew word for *erom* (עֵרֹם) or nude in verse 7. Shrewd and nude, there is a play on the sounds like that in the Hebrew. Adam and Eve were described as nude and unashamed in the last verse of chapter 2. Everything was fine. The serpent is described as shrewd in 3:1. Eve sees that the fruit will make her shrewd or wise in verse 6, but the true result is that she and Adam see themselves as nude in verse 7 (Wenham, WBC: Genesis I, 72). Wanting to see as one who is shrewd, all they see is that they are nude. Something has gone wrong.

We need to unravel for ourselves what has just happened. We cannot trust the words of the serpent at all. So, what is going on here? Here is a helpful question. “What should have Eve done? What was her role? What was expected of her?” I have some sympathy for Eve. She is naïve. No one has ever lied to her before. She has never faced deception. She is able to be completely open, physically and emotionally naked before Adam because she trusts him.

And yet, she is still held accountable for her sin. “So, what should she have done?” Or maybe we should take a step back and ask, “What could she have done? What were her options?” What do you think? What could Eve have done when faced with the questions and accusations, the temptation of the serpent?

Well, she could have asked Adam to repeat to her again what God had said. Or she could have gone to God and asked for clarification. Those are both pretty much the same. Both are going back to the revealed word of God as the source of truth on the matter, to hold the tempter’s claims up to the light of God’s word. It is exactly what Jesus did when faced by Satan in the wilderness. Faced with three different temptations, Jesus responded with three different quotes from the Pentateuch, from Deuteronomy. Three times Jesus answered and said, “It is written...”

This is getting closer, not only to what Eve could have done, but to what Eve should have done. Like Jesus, Eve should have quoted the word of God back to the serpent. She should have said, “Thus says the Lord...This is what God really said.” And she should have condemned him for questioning the truthfulness, the goodness, and the authority of God. She should have judged the serpent. That was her job, her role. Back to Genesis 1:6, God made her and Adam in his image. And he said, “Let them rule over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the sky and over the cattle and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.” Eve’s role was to rule, to act as the queen of creation, passing judgment on those who do evil.

Considering Eve’s role makes us start thinking about one of the lies of Satan. And this is a mistake a lot of readers make, not putting this together. The tree of the knowledge of good and evil is a path to a certain kind of knowledge, but it is not the only path to knowledge about good and evil. We have sympathy for Eve because if she is going to judge evil, she needs a way to gain knowledge about good and evil, so as to be a good judge. We have to be careful ourselves not to believe the lie of Satan communicated here. The tree is not the only source. There is another source here for knowledge of good and evil. It is the revealed word of God.

Where do you get your wisdom from?

This is a major theme of the story. Where do you get your wisdom from? Temptation says that the only way to wisdom is through experience. How do you know if you have not tried it? The naïve person believes the lie, not understanding that trying out evil leaves a mark on you that you cannot erase. We are not left unaffected by sin. Our minds and hearts are darkened and wounded when we sin.

Proverbs chapter 2 describes three kinds of people who reject the revealed wisdom of God. The mocker calls that which is good evil and that which is evil good. He sounds wise to the other two, the naïve person and the fool. The serpent here is the mocker, twisting around good and evil. Eve is the naïve person. The serpent sounds wise to her, and she fails to go back to God. She believes the snake and sins and cannot go back. Her view of herself and of Adam is affected. Now she sees. She sees that she is naked, and she is ashamed. And she wants to hide from Adam, and Adam wants to hide from her. Sin has not clarified their vision. It has distorted it.

Where are you going to get your wisdom? Revealed wisdom takes time, thought, and trust. Will you trust the goodness of God’s authority? Will you take the slow road to true wisdom? Or will you listen to the lie that you can only know wisdom through disobedience?

This story is not about sex, as some traditions have construed it, but we can easily see that sexual temptation works as a pretty good example. The wise person, says, “Do not go there. Wait for marriage. This is the true and good plan of God.” The world speaks for the serpent, “Why not go there? God is too strict. You are crazy to call all sex bad.” But notice we are not calling all sex bad. That’s like saying all the trees are off limits. The Bible is for great sex. It’s hard to multiply and fill the earth without sex. The pleasure of sex was God’s idea. Read the Song of Solomon for the Bible’s endorsement on romantic love. God forbids the fruit that distorts and damages, not the fruit that blesses and provides. God gave sex as a gift to be enjoyed in the context of marriage. We affirm sex in marriage.

The world then responds, “How can you know you will enjoy sex in marriage if you do not try it outside of marriage? There is important knowledge to be had here. And it is good. There are no consequences, nothing to worry about. God is just trying to keep you from the freedom and knowledge and joy that he would reserve for himself.” So, what will we do? Do we believe that there are no lasting consequences to sex outside of marriage? Do we believe God is holding back from us? Do we believe there is no knowledge except through disobedience? Or do we trust that our Creator knows what he is talking about? Do we trust that our Creator has our best interests in mind, to provide for us and to protect us and to lead us into abundant life? Do we go to him and his word to learn about sex and intimacy, relationship and marriage? Or do we reject his wisdom and his morality and do exactly what he told us not to do?

Again, this story is not about sex. But sex provides a solid example. The principle works in every area of life. Where are you going to get your wisdom from? From the Word of God? Or from the experience of sin?

Authority, Leadership, and Responsibility

Along with the theme of wisdom, we have here the theme of authority and leadership. We have to ask, “What in the world was Adam doing?” We can see to some degree what Satan was doing. I still do not know precisely why Satan chose to possess a serpent, but I believe the story suggests why he chose an animal and did not simply appear as an angel. God’s creation has an order. God rules as King of kings. Adam and Eve are his vassals, ruling over the creation, with Adam taking a leadership role in that partnership. The animals are under the authority of Adam and Eve. By possessing an animal of the creation, Satan reverses the order. The animal challenges Eve. Eve gives in to the animal and offers the fruit to Adam. Adam takes the fruit from Eve, disobeying the Word he received from God.

Recognizing this line of authority explains why Adam is the one held responsible for sin and death. Paul writes in Romans 5:12, “Therefore, just as through one man sin entered into the world, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men, because all sinned...” Paul does not let Eve off the hook. She is intelligent, moral, and responsible. She is in the image of God. She is not treated as lower than Adam. She is responsible for her part, as Paul points out in 1 Timothy 2:14, “And *it was not Adam who was deceived, but the woman being deceived, fell into transgression.*” Eve is responsible for her actions. Even so, Eve is not the one held ultimately responsible for sin and death entering the world. Adam is. And I believe that affirms the interpretation of Adam as having a special leadership role in his partnership with Eve. Because of that leadership role, he is held ultimately responsible.

It will fall on Jesus, the second Adam, to overcome the failure of the first. Whereas Adam stood by in a show of passive leadership and failed to judge the serpent but instead entered into disobedience, Jesus rebuked Satan in the wilderness, lived a life of complete obedience, even offering himself up on the tree of judgment, the cross, to pay for the sin of Adam who failed at the tree of judgment. We get just a hint of what must come in Genesis 3:15, so let’s move on to the judgement. This is the rest of chapter 3, verses 8-24.

The Judgement (3:8-24)

We could ask whether the serpent was right to say, “You shall not die.” It is the type of half truth that accompanies successful temptation. Adam and Eve did not fall down physically dead after eating the poisonous fruit. They did, however, die in every way that matters. Immediately, they died spiritually in their loss of relationship with God. And they entered into a state of death, a lingering corruption that would result in physical death and make their spiritual death eternal. Adam and Eve did die when they ate.

The effects of corruption are seen immediately. They become ashamed of who they are. They lose trust in one another. They want to cover up and hide from each other. Their shame and guilt creates a fear of God. Adam says, “I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid because I was naked; so I hid myself.” Relationship with God is broken.

When God asks, “Who told you that you were naked?”, we should not assume they were unaware of their nakedness previously, like they did not realize they were naked, but rather, before the sin, they were not ashamed of their nakedness. They were whole and vulnerable, open and transparent. There was never a reason for fear or hiding. God’s question highlights a new corruption that has immediately begun to grow in Adam and Eve in how they view themselves, how they view each other, and the effect that has on relationship.

It comes out in Adam’s response to God’s query over whether he had eaten from the tree. Defensively, Adam succeeds in blaming both God and Eve at the same time, “The woman you gave me, she gave it to me.” Eve’s response may also be seen as shifting of guilt, “The serpent deceived me.” In order of authority blame is shifted down from Adam to Eve to the serpent. The judgment appropriate to each will be stated in reverse order from the serpent to Eve to Adam.

Now, the curse on the serpent is delivered as the curse of an animal and can be taken as affecting a whole subclass of reptiles. If so, it makes you wonder whether serpents originally had legs, since the curse now declares that they are going to move on their bellies. And I think that is the wrong way to view the serpent. I think the curse is not on snakes in general. It is on the one who possessed this particular snake. I think snakes had always traveled on their bellies, and I do not think they literally eat dust. I think that is a figurative statement of shame.

I think God is using the snake to say to Satan something like this, “You may think you are wise and crafty. The serpent may appeal to your nature. I say it reveals your nature. Though you were created beautiful and intelligent and powerful. You sought to grasp hold of more and in doing so have become lower than the animals of the earth, even as low as a snake. You think you are so much higher than humanity. I say you are not. You are deceptive. You are a belly crawler. You are shameful.” In this sense, the curse of the serpent is figurative for the true curse which is aimed at Satan.

So then, in verse 15, the enmity between snakes and people is not the focus of the text. It is a good illustration. It is figurative of spiritual reality. People really do seem to be scared of snakes, and snakes don’t seem to mind biting people. But the enmity prophesied here is the spiritual enmity between the line of Eve, those who would follow God, and the line of the serpent, those who would follow Satan. Satan will continue to strike out at God’s people, using people to do so. He will use people against people. Ultimately, this will lead us to Jesus, the true seed of Eve. Satan will strike him, hurt him, convince the masses to chant, “Crucify Him! Crucify Him!” But in death, Jesus will win, stamping on the head of Satan, saving many out of his grasp, and initiating his final ruin.

That’s the judgment on the serpent. In the judgements on both Adam and Eve, we see that their roles to fill the earth and cultivate the earth do not change. They still have purpose. They still have work to do. But God does allow the physical world to fall into corruption. Eve will bear many, but she will be in pain. And her relationship to her husband will be strained, tense, difficult. Adam’s work of cultivation will become a struggle. He will toil just to grow what is needed to survive. Just for bread.

We can imagine why God does this. When you allow a sinful man to live in a pleasant, soft, easy world, he remains blind to the death inside of him. What good is it to live an easy life, never turn to God, never see any need and so, fade away forever into eternal separation and death. It is better that our outer world reflects our inner reality of corruption so that we might strain and struggle and see our need for God. Paul writes about this in Romans 8:20, “For the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will, but because of him who subjected it...” God caused the created environment, which he declared good, to be twisted and corrupted along with the fallen King and Queen for whom that environment had originally been designed.

There is hope in Adam’s naming of Eve in verse 20. Though death has entered the world, he calls her Eve, which means life. And then in verse 21, God clothes Adam and Eve. I have heard that the point here is one of sacrifice. God clothed them with animal garments, taking away their shame of their nakedness, but not without price. Animals had to die. I agree that the clothing symbolizes a removal of shame, but there is an ancient practice other than sacrifice which might be in mind here. In the

Ancient Near East, a son's robe represented his family status. It is probably the problem with the robe Joseph received at the end of Genesis. To the other brothers the robe was a declaration that Joseph had been given the special position of first born. So, while a son who gets a robe is being given position in family, a son who was disinherited is disrobed and sent out. If the father chose to allow the son back into the family to re-inherit him, then that son was to be re-robed. This may be the significance of verse 21. God is re-robing Adam and Eve. They must still bear the consequence of their sin. The curse still stands. And they must leave the garden. But by dressing them, God takes away their shame. He symbolically declares, "You are mine."

Verses 22-24 describe the final moment, the expulsion of Adam and Eve from the garden. God says, "Behold, the man has become like one of Us, knowing good and evil; and now, he might stretch out his hand, and take also from the tree of life, and eat, and live forever." It is difficult to know precisely what it means to say that he "has become like one of us, knowing good and evil." I believe the "us" is a reference to God himself, maybe, possibly a foreshadowing the trinity. He had declared in 1:26, "Let us make man in our image." So, God is using the plural for himself. Another question is whether there is irony here. I think there is. This was what Satan promised. The wording is nearly the same as in verse 5, "For God knows that in the day you eat from it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil." That was the promise of the lie. And God repeats it here. But as we have seen that statement come true only in a sense. I think it is spoken here as irony or sarcasm. You received what you wanted. You have gained knowledge like God, but you did not do it in line with the holiness of God. You sought the shortcut of disobedience. You rejected God's way and sought to establish your own way. And they are not completely like God. There is a difference in the way they go about gaining knowledge. And their hearts and minds have experienced the effect of separation from God. That is why they cannot take of the tree of life to live forever. It would be to live forever in a state of death, zombie like. They have been cursed. They are fallen. They are separated from God. So that eternal death is what must be prevented. Adam and Eve must be cast out of the presence of God's holiness, so that they first might be redeemed and then brought back in to live forever.

The story of redemption is going to start with promise God makes in Genesis 12 to Abraham. That's the second half of Genesis. The beginning of that story. Between here and there, chapters 4-11 the inevitable effects of sin on the entire human race is made clear. We are going to survey those chapters now. There is a lot here. Since I want us to move us along, I am going to keep my focus in 4-11 on the effect of the fall and the struggle, the ongoing struggle between the seed of the serpent and the seed of Eve. I apologize in advance for the good material I am going to have to skip over.

Overview of the Fall, the Flood and the Nations (Genesis 4-11)

The story of the effects of sin picks up in chapter 4 with Cain and Able. It is a simple, but powerful story of jealousy and desire for approval. Cain falls short, and he wants to be approved. But rather than take responsibility for his own shortcomings, he blames Able. And God, warns him. God says, "Sin is crouching at the door; and its desire is for you, but you must master it." Cain gives in to sin and commits the first murder. The chapter then traces Cain's line down to Lamech who treats his wives as property, boasts about murdering a man, and declares vengeance on anyone who would defy him. This is the line of the serpent. But the chapter ends with the birth of Seth. His descendants will be the line of Eve. They are the focus of chapter 5.

That chapter starts repeating the declaration from chapter 1 that Adam is made in the image or likeness of God. Then we have a long list of descendants. I will highlight the main idea. So, listen for it.

Adam became the father of a son in his own likeness, according to his image, and named him Seth...so, all the days that Adam lived were nine hundred and thirty years, and he died.

Seth became the father of Enosh...so all the days of Seth were nine hundred and twelve years, and he died.

Enosh became the father of Kenan...so all the days of Enosh were nine hundred and five years, and he died.

Kenan became the father of Mahalalel...so all the days of Kenan were nine hundred and ten years, and he died.

Mahalalel became the father of Jared...so all the days of Mahalalel were eight hundred and ninety-five years, and he died.

Jared became the father of Enoch...so all the days of Jared were nine hundred and sixty-two years, and he died.

Enoch became the father of Methuselah...so all the days of Enoch were three hundred and sixty-five years. And Enoch walked with God; and he was not, for God took him.

Methuselah became the father of Lamech...so all the days of Methuselah were nine hundred and sixty-nine years, and he died.

Lamech become the father of Noah...so all the days of Lamech were seven hundred and seventy-seven years, and he died.

So, what's the point? And he died. And he died. And he died. And he died. You get the repetition. Enoch certainly stands out as a strange anomaly. He did not die. God took him. But Enoch is not the main point. Enoch is an exception that helps highlight the rule. The main idea of the chapter is that Adam was created in God's image, but Seth, Seth was in the likeness of Adam. He was fallen man, the image of God twisted or polluted, still there but corrupted from its original form, so that in the line of Eve there is death. Eat of the fruit and you will die. That is what has happened. And that is what we see here. The sin of Adam and Eve affects all the seed of Adam and Eve, including each of us. We are in the image of God, but also in the image of Adam, fallen, polluted, sinful from birth, destined to die.

If you calculate the numbers, you will find that Methuselah dies the year of the flood. Eve's line has run its course. The line of the serpent dominates. I take the sons of God in Genesis 6:2 to be those who follow God, the line of Eve through Seth. It is not a group of angelic beings but those who are believers, followers of God. And the daughters of men are of the line of Cain and Lamech. They are the pagan society that has rejected God and do not follow him. And as they intermarry, they produce the mighty men of old, who gain renown in the world. But intermarriage has not raised the wicked line up but rather lowered down the righteous line, a pattern we see through the Old Testament and into our modern day. Marriage rarely works out in leading a non-believer to trust and follow God. The resultant society is described in 6:5, "The Lord saw that the wickedness of man was great on the earth and that every intent of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually."

On all the earth only Noah and his immediate family follow God. They are the remaining remnant of the line of Eve. So, God judges all of humanity, he and executes his judgment through the flood. But he saves Noah and his family through the waters of chaos. He brings them to dry land and renews covenant with them.¹ This is 9:9, "Behold, I myself do establish my covenant with you, and with your descendants after you." There is a dark note here in this chapter. Even though Noah showed incredible faith, the story in chapter 9 ends with Noah getting drunk and with something sketchy happening in his tent that has to do with Ham and the nakedness of Noah. We don't get the details of the story. But we see that Noah did not escape the curse of sin. He brought it with him in the ark through the flood waters.

Chapter 10 starts another genealogy list, the list of Noah's sons, Shem, Ham and Japheth. Coming after the flood story, this sounds like a positive repopulation of the earth, but at the end of each son's list there is the foreshadowing of a serious problem. At the end of each list, we are told that the descendants are each according to their own family, land, and languages. We are also told in verses 5 and 32 that they have been separated out from one another. And this sounds simply like a reporting of fact with no good or bad to it. But how did this separating out occur? And how did the division into different language groups happen?

¹ Dr. Niehaus argues Jeffrey J. Niehaus. *Biblical Theology, Volume 1, The Common Grace Covenants*. (Wooster, Ohio: Weaver Book Company, 2014) 212.

Chapter 11 tells us what happened. It is the tower of Babel. Whenever God blesses people, those people, over time take credit for the blessing. We seek our own glory and our own name. There is a 4100-year old ziggurat in Ur in modern day Iraq. It is a step pyramid with 3 layers or steps. It is 150 feet tall. And the top is like a helicopter pad. The idea of the ziggurat is to make a stepping stool for the gods. They can step down onto the platform and it is just three god-sized steps to the ground.

In the story of the Fall, God had already made Adam and Eve in his image. But they did not trust him. They believed that God did not want them to be like him. They were missing something and not satisfied with the identity God had given them, so they reached out their hands to make themselves like God, to take more, to eat the fruit. At the tower of Babel, the voice of the serpent lives on. God had established covenant with Noah. Human beings would derive their name, their identity from relationship with God. But that was not enough for the descendants of Noah.

So, 11:4 states, “Come, let us build for ourselves a city, and a tower whose top will reach into heaven, and let us make for ourselves a name, lest we be scattered abroad over the face of the earth.” Well, scattering abroad over the face of the earth, that’s the original covenant. That’s the idea. That was the purpose. “Multiply and fill the earth.” They don’t want to do that. They want to make their own name for themselves. They rejected that mission. And instead, they sought lift themselves up to the heavens to meet God on their own terms, by their own strength. It is this idea, “I will be the captain of my own soul. I will do it my way.” It is a rejection of the definition of God and of the glory God has assigned to man. We will define ourselves. And we will seek our own glory.

In response to this rebellion against his purposes, God confused mankind. He broke them apart and scattered them himself. They had come to believe the lie that they were independent of God. They were good in themselves. They were not in need of saving. To this point in time, God had dealt with humankind all as one. He made a covenant with all men through Adam. And he renewed that covenant with all men through Noah. History is about to change. God switches to a divide and conquer strategy. And instead of dealing with all men at once, he is going to choose one nation to be his special people. And through that one nation he is going to reach the rest. And he is not going to choose any great nation, no Babylonians or Hittites or Egyptians, not for his plan of salvation, so that no empire of man can say that we did it by our strength and our might and our wisdom. God is going to start over with a barren couple who, so far from being a nation, do not even have one child. God makes a promise to this couple in Genesis 12. And we will pick up there in our next lesson.

Reflection Questions

1. What stands out to you as you read Genesis 3:1-7? What do you notice as interesting or important or strange or confusing? What questions come to mind in regard to the temptation of Eve?
2. Where do you get your wisdom from? What do you think Eve should have done, and how does that apply to you today?
3. What stands out to you as you read Genesis 3:8-24? What do you notice as interesting or important or strange or confusing? What questions come to mind in regard to the judgment of Adam and Eve?
4. Considering Genesis 3:8-24, what seems to have changed after the Fall of Adam and Eve, and what has not changed?
5. Go back and look in Genesis 1 for the phrase “after their kind.” How many times is that phrase repeated? Now look at Genesis 5:1-3. Whose kind was Adam originally made after? Whose kind is Seth and his descendants made after?
6. Consider your answer to question 4 as you think about the big picture point being made in chapters 4-11, starting with Cain and Able in chapter 4 through the Tower of Babel in chapter 11? How would you summarize the big idea being made about humanity in these chapters?
7. Thinking back over this whole lesson, what one insight stands out to you the most, or has made the biggest impression on you?

Lesson 4: Genesis 12-15 Abraham, part 1

Introduction

The story of Genesis begins with God creating a new environment called the heavens and the earth. He created this environment for humankind, beginning with Adam and Eve as King and Queen. God gave them a great commission to rule over the creation, to multiply and fill the creation, and to reflect his image in the creation.

And yet, the creation is not primarily about man and woman. It is primarily about the glory of God, the fame of his name. God is the center of all things from which all good emanates. The spread of God's glory does not exclude people. It includes people. We are invited to celebrate God's goodness with God. We are created to enjoy relationship with him and participate in the display of his glory.

The decision of Adam and Eve to turn away from God and choose their own way, resulted in the corruption of both mankind and the creation. We are no longer purely in the image of God. We are now in the corrupted fallen image of Adam. From Cain and Abel through the flood to the tower of Babel, Genesis 4-11 reveals the depravity of the human heart. We are a corrupt race in need of salvation.

What's the plan? How does God restore a righteous human kingdom on earth with a people dedicated to walking with him and imaging his glory? We have creation and fall. What's the plan for redemption?

Kingdom and Covenant

Remember in our first lesson I introduced the kingdom motif as a theme that runs through the whole of the Bible. There are six elements to the motif. Kingdom requires a king, a people, a land, a palace, a covenant and a mediator. We could trace the theological development of each of these ideas, each of these elements, through the Pentateuch. I especially want us to keep in mind covenant as the statement of the relationship between the great king and his vassal people.



When I talk about covenant, instead of saying that God made a covenant, I will usually use the terminology, "God cut covenant." That is the literal translation for the phrase "to make a covenant" pretty much any time it occurs in the Old Testament. Covenants were not made in the Ancient Near East. They were cut. An animal was killed, and the vassal was required to make a self-imprecatory oath, that is to bring a curse on himself if he were to break faith with his suzerain. He was saying, "Let what has been done to this animal be done to me if I break covenant with you my king."

In our day, we tend to just use signatures and a stamp. When you get married you sign the marriage certificate along with the minister or the civil clerk and a couple of witnesses. That makes the marriage covenant legal. A shotgun wedding would add in the element of the curse. That's when the daddy of the bride stands in the back with a shotgun to make sure the groom goes through with it and to give him a visible reminder of what is going to come down on him if he breaks faith with daddy's little girl. The dead animal and the shotgun serve the same purpose.

Here's an example of a ratification ceremony, or cutting of covenant, from an ancient near eastern suzerain vassal treaty between Ashurnirari V of Assyria and Mati'ilu of Arpad. This is what the tablet says. After decapitating a lamb, this text was to be read.

“This head is not the head of a lamb, it is the head of Mati’ilu, it is the head of his sons, his officials, and the people of his land. If Mati’ilu sins against this treaty, so may, just as the head of this spring lamb is torn off, and its knuckle placed in its mouth, [...], the head of Mati’ilu be torn off, and his sons [...].

This shoulder is not the shoulder of a spring lamb, it is the shoulder of Mati’ilu, it is the shoulder of his sons, his officials, and the people of this land. If Mati’ilu sins against this treaty, so may, just as the shoulder of this spring lamb is torn out, and [...], the shoulder of Mati’ilu, of his sons, his officials, and the people of his land be torn out [...] (Pritchard, *ANET* 532-533).”

So, you get the picture. The covenant is written out. And now Mati’ilu, the vassal, not the suzerain, the lower king, has to go through this ceremony where they take a lamb and cut its head off and rip its leg out and shove the leg in the mouth. And then Mati’ilu is supposed to stand there and say, “If I break covenant with you O great king, then let it be done to me, and not just me but my sons and all my officials, what was done to this lamb. Rip my arms out and stick them in my mouth.” That’s the symbol. And when that was done, when the sacrifice is made and the oath is taken, now the written covenant is legal. It has been ratified.

The great king does not communicate covenant directly to the vassal people. He uses a covenant mediator to do that. There are six primary covenant mediators in the Bible. We call them prophets. But they are a special kind of prophet. Most biblical prophets are not covenant mediators. God does not use them to establish covenant. Most biblical prophets are covenant lawsuit prophets. They bring lawsuit. So, Elijah, Elisha, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Amos, Habakkuk, all these guys were calling people back to covenant faithfulness in relationship to the existing covenant. They are not the ones who established the covenant. That happens only on a rare occasion through a very small number of prophets.

Of the six covenant mediator prophets in the Bible, we can divide them into two categories. There are those through whom God established common grace covenant, that is covenant with all of humankind, and those through whom God established special grace covenant, that is covenant with a special group of people. And there are only two common grace covenant mediators. Both of them are present in the ground we have already covered in Genesis 1-11. So, who do you think they are? Who are the two covenant mediators through whom has God made covenant with all of



humankind? If you are thinking of Adam and Noah, you are right. Adam and Noah are our first covenant mediators. Through them God establishes covenant with everybody. Through them there is a common grace kingdom. Like it or not, all humanity is either in covenant with their Creator God or in covenant rebellion against their Creator. There is a common grace kingdom that includes all people.

The next four covenant mediators in the Bible are going to bring covenant from God for a special group of people. We can call this special grace kingdom. Do you know who these four prophets are? When you think about covenant in the Bible, who do you think of? Who brings covenant? Abraham, Moses, David and Jesus. So, there is the Abrahamic covenant, we often call it the promise; the Mosaic covenant or the law; the Davidic covenant which is really with a very special group of people, it is just for his line that the Messiah will come through him and his house established forever; and then, of course, Jesus who brings new covenant, the covenant of grace.

So, now God has moved into the divide and conquer approach. Instead of addressing all humanity at once, he is going to focus in on a special group. It is the next phase in God's plan of redemption. To this point in Genesis, God has worked with everybody, all of humankind. But after the tower of Babel incident, God separated humanity out from one another, confusing them in their pursuit to establish a name for themselves. The vassals would rebel. They would rule the kingdom of heaven and earth as originally intended by the suzerain king, but they would do so on their own terms, lifting themselves up to the same level as the King of kings, not under him but equal to him. They would make a name for themselves. It's the voice of humanism. That voice is not new. The voice of humanism rejects that there is something inherently wrong with the human race. It rejects the authority of God. It claims independence from God. And it claims the right to rule equal with God.

God confused this attempted rebellion, and he scattered the people apart into separate tribes, languages, and communities in order to contain their sense of pride and self-sufficiency. And now, rather than offering redemption through a common mediator to all humankind, God begins to work through one new nation. He will make his capital among a special people whose purpose will be to bless the nations of the earth. And he is going to do this with a people that are not a people, a nation that is not a nation. He is going to do this with an older man and an older woman who have not been able to have any children. Genesis 12 begins the story of redemption, and it starts with the call of Abraham.

Promise Made (12:1-3)

Surveying Abraham's story creates this frustration in me at how little information we have on the life of the father of our faith. One Harry Potter novel gets 900 pages for one year in the life of a fictitious magician. And all we have are 10 or 12 pages for the full life of Abraham. I'd love to know more. I want more information. Wouldn't it be great to have a book on the life of Abraham written by someone who was there with him? I guess we are going to have to wait to talk to him in person. For now, I am reminded of how important what we have is. God has given us this for a reason.

When you read the story of Abraham from Genesis 12 to 25 takes us through a series of events that are going to cover his whole lifetime. You are just kind of moving from event to event to event. And it includes dialogue. And it's often between Abraham and God. And what is said and what is done are both very important, inviting us to close attention. Since we are doing an overview, I am going to focus in only on four critical events. These are four covenant events in the life of Abraham. We will do two in this lesson and then two in the next lesson. The four events are the promise made in Genesis 12, the covenant cut in Genesis 15, the covenant sign in Genesis 17, and the covenant test in Genesis 22. So, promise made and covenant cut in this lesson, starting with the promise made in Genesis 12:1-3. Let's read those three verses.

¹ Now the LORD said to Abram, "Go forth from your country, And from your relatives And from your father's house, To the land which I will show you; ² And I will make you a great nation, And I will bless you, And make your name great; And so you shall be a blessing; ³ And I will bless those who bless you, And the one who curses you I will curse. And in you all the families of the earth will be blessed."

This is a great gospel. Can you imagine this? "Abraham, if you trust me, I will give you descendants, land, provision, protection. Not only am I going to give you all your heart desires. Not only am I going to protect you from your enemies. I am also going to make your life matter. I am going to bless the nations through you: descendants, land, provision, protection *and purpose*." What would you say to such a gospel?

God's plan ties back into the previous history. In chapter 11 man reaches up to make a name for himself. Here God reaches down and lifts Abraham up, telling him, "I will make your name great." God is going to give Abraham a name. His desire is not to keep us pressed down but to lift us up in right relationship with him. We make our name by walking with God, not by breaking away from God.

Along with the reference to name, the reference to nations links us back the previous story to. In chapter 10 we have the table of nations. And so, that is all of humankind, descended from Noah either from Ham or Shem or Japheth. These nations are the ones who sought to make a name for themselves, to make themselves like God, and to these sinful people, this is the plan, the descendants of Abraham are going to be a blessing. So, through Abraham the line of Eve lives on.

So, Abraham believes. He does have to respond in faith. He accepts this gospel. And he sets out to the promised land. The first thing he does is to build an altar and to worship Yahweh. It's a wonderful sign of his commitment to God. It also seems to contain a sense of expectant optimism. It's like, "Here I am God. You know, I've arrived. I am in the promise land. Now what? What's next? Let's get started on the getting the blessing and being a blessing.

But what happens next in the story. Well, life happens. There is famine in the land. Abraham has to go down to Egypt to find food. And there he is afraid, so he hides the fact that Sarah is his wife. Far from being a blessing to the nations, he becomes a curse. Because God sends a plague on Egypt to protect Sarah. And then they get kicked out of Egypt. And they return to Canaan, probably a bit humbled. Abraham does build an altar again. He is still worshipping Yahweh. But then there is this separation between him and Lot. Lot is not so focused on worshipping Yahweh. He eventually gets mixed up with Sodom and Gomorrah. Abraham has to go on a rescue mission to save him. And then Sodom and Gomorrah get destroyed. And Lot's wife dies.

The gospel given to Abraham reminds me of the gospel offered to all of us. And how it often works. It really is great news. God has promised us a land. He has promised us heaven, a home, a place, inclusion. He has promised to bless us. He offers us abundant life. He gives us purpose that we can be part of his plan in blessing other people. And God will cause all of it to come true. But that does not at all mean it is going to be easy. It starts with a wonderful gospel, but life is going to be hard. There is going to be suffering. And I wonder if he let me in on how hard serving him was going to be whether I ever would have had the courage to set out. So, I am glad he didn't. I am glad he waits. I began a bit naïve. I feel like Abraham. He started out with all this hope, but then he began to struggle.

This brings us to chapter 15 and the cutting of covenant. This is maybe 10 years after God's call came to Abraham. And he still doesn't have children. This is a very important chapter, so let's focus in. We are going to go through all the verses of Genesis 15, covenant cut.

Covenant Cut (15:1-21)



There is a pattern to the text. First, God speaks, then Abraham speaks, then God speaks again. Then in the middle of the chapter, we are told Abraham believes. After that the pattern is repeated. God speaks, Abraham speaks, God speaks. So, we will start with the first half. And we will start with God speaking. This is verse 1.

God speaks (1)

¹ After these things the word of the LORD came to Abram in a vision, saying, "Do not fear, Abram, I am a shield to you; Your reward shall be very great."

It is a short summary of the promise from Genesis 12, blessing and protection. But when Abraham hears it, he immediately thinks of child. That is the top of his mind. That is the number one blessing he is waiting on. And now we are going to read Abraham's response. And consider whether this sounds like faith to you. Does it sound like Abraham is trusting God?

Abraham speaks (2-3)

² Abram said, "O Lord GOD, what will You give me, since I am childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?" ³ And Abram said, "Since You have given no offspring to me, one born in my house is my heir."

Is this faith?

Does that sound like faith to you? When I ask this question in class, I get both responses. I get “Yes.” I get “No.”

It is difficult to tell the state of Abraham’s faith at this point. It does not sound like he is trusting God for descendants if he expects to have to adopt his servant as his heir. But you could imagine that Abraham’s complaint is a pleading to God for the how. How God? I want to believe you God. I want to believe you are going to do this, but how? You gave a promise, but my life reality is not matching up with the promise. When this happens to us, when we think we know how things should go, we have expectations and they do not go that way, it can really throw us off. It disorients us. How do I bring these two things together? How do I bring my expectations of God and God’s promises together with the mess and the reality of life? Abraham could say to God, “You said I would have a child, but it has been 10 years. My wife is old and barren. How Lord? I don’t get it. It’s not happening. What’s going on?”

And at this point of disorientation when our expectations do not match reality, unbelief shuts God off. Unbelief becomes bitter, and it turns from God. Belief, in the same situation, cries out to God. The father in Mark 9, whose son is possessed cries out to Jesus, “I believe, help my unbelief.”

There is some weakness in there. There is some struggle. Which is it for Abraham? Is this disbelief, a turning from God? Or is it a cry of struggling faith?

God looks into the heart.

One of the challenges interpreting biblical narrative is that we often get dialogue and action without narration. We are not told anything about what is going on inside Abraham’s heart and or in his mind. And we are not told what God thinks about Abraham’s response. We are supposed to follow the story and draw conclusions based on what God says or what God does. Because God responds not only to words and actions but also to what he sees in the person’s heart.

This happens all the time when he is interacting with people. For example, after the miracles at the Passover when many believed, why didn’t Jesus entrust himself to those people? Well, John tells us, “he did not need anyone to bear witness concerning man for he himself knew what was in a man (John 2:25).” He sees past the words, or the profession, into the heart.

There is a great example in Luke 1 with the parallel between Zacharias, father of John the Baptist and Mary, mother of Jesus. Gabriel shows up to Zacharias and says, your wife is going to have a child and Zacharias says, “How can this be?” The same Gabriel shows up to Mary and tells her she is going to have a child. Even more shocked, I imagine, Mary also responds, “How can this be?” Gabriel then strikes Zacharias dumb for daring to ask, “How can this be?”. He is not going to get to talk for 9 months. But to Mary, she asks, “How can this be?”, and the response is like, “Good question. Let me explain.” She is approved. She is not rebuked.

You can be sure that Luke is not unaware of the situational irony he has just put together in the narrative side by side. He includes both stories in the same chapter. And we are supposed to notice the similarity and then that difference. We are supposed to conclude that the difference between Zacharias and Mary is not their words. It is their heart. I believe it is a way of pointing out the faith of Mary.

So, how is God going to respond to Abraham? With rebuke or with explanation? Let’s read what God says. This is in verses 4 and 5.

God speaks (4-5)

⁴ Then behold, the word of the LORD came to him, saying, “This man will not be your heir; but one who will come forth from your own body, he shall be your heir.” ⁵ And He took him outside and said, “Now look toward the heavens, and count the stars, if you are able to count them.” And He said to him, “So shall your descendants be.”

It's not really an explanation is it? And this is also classic God. God does not tell Abraham how it is going to be or when it is going to be. He is not really answering the question that's posed. Abraham wants the details. But he is not getting the details. God is just saying, "Trust me. It's going to work out as I say it will." It's not an explanation. It's an illustration. And it's encouragement to help Abraham to keep going, keep trusting.

So, how then does Abraham respond?

Abraham believes (6)

⁶ Then he believed in the LORD; and He reckoned it to him as righteousness.

If we are not sure about the state of Abraham's heart in verse 2, we are now. So, Abraham believes. And that faith is counted to Abraham as righteousness. Abraham does not do any righteousness. He simply trusts in the promise of God. And because of that trust, God declares Abraham righteous.

This promise is about having a child, but not only about having a child. It is about having a child through whom the nations will be blessed. This is God's plan for the nations. We do not know how clear all of that was to Abraham. We do know he is being asked to trust in God's plan of salvation. He is being asked to trust in the promise. And he does. And it is reckoned to him as righteousness.

Now, in the rest of the chapter, we are going to get the pattern repeated. God speaks, Abraham speaks, God speaks again.

God speaks (7)

⁷ And He said to him, "I am the LORD who brought you out of Ur of the Chaldeans, to give you this land to possess it."

This is that next main blessing given to Abraham in the promise of Genesis 12. So, not only are you going to have descendants, but you are also going to get land. Consider Abraham's response. Again, does this sound like faith?

Abraham speaks (8)

⁸ He said, "O Lord GOD, how may I know that I will possess it?"

Yes or no, is that faith? It sounds the same, which is really kind of strange because we just had this clear affirmation of faith in verse 6. So, we expect Abraham to be good with the plan.

But it is so human. No matter how real our faith is, we have doubts, we have struggles, we want to know how. And that's the question Abraham seems to be asking again. He looks around him, and all he sees are Hittites and Amorites and Canaanites. And they have land. They have the towns and the vineyards. What does Abraham have? Nothing. Well, he has a lot of possessions. He has no land. He is moving from well to well to water his flocks. And at the end of his life he is going to have to barter with a Hittite to buy a place to bury Sarah. So, Abraham again is asking, "How?" "I don't see it God. How? When?"

And again, God does not rebuke Abraham for his questions. He encourages Abraham. But it is going to be with more than an illustration. God is going to do something very special. You know how people are constantly asking Jesus questions, and Jesus rarely answers the question? He responds to the question, but you are like, "Where did that come from? What does that have to do with anything? Why did he say that?" It's like when Jesus told that young man, "Go and sell everything you have and then come back and follow me." Where did that come from? It is because Jesus hears more than the question. It's more than the words we say. Jesus hears what is behind the question. He sees the hidden motives of the heart. He is aware of the deeper issue.

I think we have that with God here. Abraham is asking, "How? How can I know I will get the land? Get a son?" Part of the how is looking around at the outer circumstances of life? Sarah is old. The land is already populated. But part of the how deals with our own inner questions, like, "Do I have what it takes to remain faithful? How can I know that I am going to live up, that I will be approved? I hear your promise God, but what about me? How can I know that I am going to remain faithful in order to

have the son, in order to inherit the land? How do I know I am going to make the right decisions or do your will?"

And again, I do not know how much of that was clear to Abraham, on the top level of his mind in his thinking. But it is deep in the reality of the human heart, our insecurities of who we are. "What if I don't have true faith? What if I can't keep this up? What if I mess it up? I've already got strikes against me. Nobody really knows how messed up I am. What if the mask drops? What if I cross the line, and it becomes public?" Have you ever felt that? "What if I get uncovered? What if I have to stand naked and ashamed?"

In answering Abraham's how question, God is going to let him know what is going to happen to the inhabitants of the land. God is going to solve the outward circumstances. But this answer goes so much deeper to addressing the self-doubts, the weakness, the sin, that is implicit in Abraham's question.

God speaks (9-21)

This is God speaking again, and it is going to be most of the chapter. It is verses 9-21. Let's deal with it in two parts. So, first, verses 9-16. This is the part that would have been quite clear to the ancient near eastern reader. They are going to know what is going on, so, 9-16.

⁹ So He said to him, "Bring Me a three year old heifer, and a three year old female goat, and a three year old ram, and a turtledove, and a young pigeon." ¹⁰ Then he brought all these to Him and cut them in two, and laid each half opposite the other; but he did not cut the birds. ¹¹ The birds of prey came down upon the carcasses, and Abram drove them away. ¹² Now when the sun was going down, a deep sleep fell upon Abram; and behold, terror *and* great darkness fell upon him. ¹³ *God* said to Abram, "Know for certain that your descendants will be strangers in a land that is not theirs, where they will be enslaved and oppressed four hundred years. ¹⁴ "But I will also judge the nation whom they will serve, and afterward they will come out with many possessions. ¹⁵ "As for you, you shall go to your fathers in peace; you will be buried at a good old age. ¹⁶ "Then in the fourth generation they will return here, for the iniquity of the Amorite is not yet complete."

Ok. So, the answers clear, it's not really desirable, that you are going to get the land. It's just going to take 400 years for your descendants to be able to populate it. So, that is a tough answer. So, Abraham is actually getting some of the details with this answer. But then the whole business of cutting the animals, that is all strange to us. None of it is normal. But it was very clear to the ancient readers. They recognized exactly what's going on. And maybe you do, too, now. This is the cutting of covenant. God is having Abraham set up an oath ceremony. He has cut the animals, and he has placed them half on one side and half on the other side. That's normal.

It gets confirmed in verse 18, "On that day the Lord made a covenant with Abram." And remember that Hebrew word translated in your Bible as made a covenant is literally cut a covenant. So, Abraham is setting up this cutting of covenant ceremony. Does God need to enter into a legal agreement with Abraham? Well, no. God made a promise. That promise stands. God doesn't need to ratify his own word. God is condescending to use a known human form of agreement, a suzerain-vassal treaty, to communicate something to Abraham. This is not for God. This is for Abraham. And for us.

The first part is known to them, not unusual. The second part is where it gets weird, even for the ancient reader. This is not supposed to happen, verse 17-21 don't really make sense even to them. Let's read that.

¹⁷ It came about when the sun had set, that it was very dark, and behold, *there appeared* a smoking oven and a flaming torch which passed between these pieces. ¹⁸ On that day the LORD made a covenant with Abram, saying, "To your descendants I have given this land, From the river of Egypt as far as the great river, the river Euphrates: ¹⁹ the Kenite and the Kenizzite and

the Kadmonite ²⁰ and the Hittite and the Perizzite and the Rephaim ²¹ and the Amorite and the Canaanite and the Girgashite and the Jebusite.”

So, what’s weird about this? The animals are cut and ready, laid out on a path. Who is supposed to walk through the pieces? Abraham. By his action, the vassal communicates to the great king, “If I break covenant with you great king then let it be done to me what has been done to these animals.” But instead we have a smoking pot and a flaming torch passing through the pieces. And that’s what’s weird. Why a smoking pot and flaming torch? And why doesn’t Moses explain this? What does he expect us to think this is? Well, then we ask, “Does the context help us?” Where do we see smoke and fire in the books of Moses? Well, we see smoke and fire in pillars that lead the people through the wilderness. We see smoke and fire at the burning bush. And we see smoke and fire on Mt. Sinai during the cutting of covenant with Israel. And then we get it. Smoke and fire in the Pentateuch symbolizes the presence of God.

God passes through the pieces! Abraham is not even involved. He is put to sleep off on the side. And the great king passes through. That never happens. In essence God is declaring, “If you break covenant with me, then let me die.”

Matthew 27 describes the fulfillment of that proclamation. The great king follows through with his word. From the sixth hour to the ninth, there was darkness on the land. Hanging on the cross, Jesus gave up his spirit. And the temple curtain was torn in two. There was an earthquake. The soldiers were terrified. They were frightened. “If you break covenant with me, I die.” That is what God said. That is what Jesus did. He took the curse.

And that’s how you know that the promise of God is sure. Because it does not depend on you. It depends on God.

The 1st question of covenant

The first basic question of covenant asks, “What makes me acceptable to God?” Or “What makes me righteous enough to be in relationship with a holy God?”

Let’s think of this in terms of grace and law. In this sense, grace is what God does. Law is what you do. So, think of law as the dos and the don’ts. They are the stipulations of covenant. And there is a lot of that kind of law, not just in the Old Covenant but also in the New Covenant. It is all over the place. “Love your neighbor. Be devoted to prayer. Give to those in need. Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouth but only what is useful for building others up. Love your enemy.” These are the stipulations of covenant. The dos and the donts. The law.

Grace is God’s part. Law is your part. So, let’s put this into percentages. What percentage of being approved by God relies on grace, is God’s part? And what percentage of being approved by God relies on you on your obedience or your fulfilling the covenant stipulations? What’s your part? What’s God’s part? I am speaking at a youth conference this week. And I asked the question to this group of Christian teenagers. And they gave me a lot of possibilities. They gave me 50-50, 50% grace and 50% law. They gave me 99% versus 1%; 100%, 0%; 90%, 10%. So, which is it?

What is the answer for Abraham? How much was him, and how much was God? Well, we go back up to verse 6, “Then he believed in the LORD; and He reckoned it to him as righteousness.” What was Abraham doing during the cutting of covenant? Nothing! He was in a deep sleep as passive as a person can be without being dead. The righteousness you need to make you acceptable to God is not something that you can do. It is only something you receive. It is passive to you. It is active to God. The answer is 100% grace, 0% law. You cannot contribute to making yourself acceptable to God. Either you are completely by the grace of Christ or something depends on you, just that 1%. We will just go 99 and 1 that depends on you. You are going to mess up. You are going to ruin the 1%, by your thoughts, by your words, by your deeds. You will not keep covenant with God.

Paul nails this home in his letter to the Romans. I am not going to go through all that right now. I’ll refer you to the observetheword podcast on Romans if you want to get a more thorough argument

of our righteousness by grace through faith, that it is 100% grace, 0% law. Thoroughly covered there. If you just want to jump into the main point, you can go to Romans 3:21-30 or Romans 4, which is where Paul spends a whole chapter explaining this verse Genesis 15:6 as the precedent. Abraham is the precedent for the New Covenant assertion that justification is by grace alone through faith alone. It cannot be part grace and part works. It is either all grace or it is not grace. As Paul says in Romans 11:6, "If it is by grace, it is no longer on the basis of works, otherwise grace is no longer grace."

Looking back over Genesis 15, I love how the literary structure of the story emphasizes truth about faith and grace. Faith is the human part of being made acceptable before God. So, if we say there is anything you have to do, you have to receive the gift. Faith is necessary. We must trust God and receive his plan of salvation. That is clear. It is right in the center of the text. Abraham believed and was declared righteous.

Yet, on either side of Genesis 15:6, we see that Abraham's faith does not look that impressive. It looks very human. The strength of the passage is not in the faith of man, but in the grace of God. God's grace comes at the end of the story and anchors the whole.

So, imagine two guys dared to go out onto an icy lake. And one maybe jumps off a pier onto the ice with great confidence. And the other one, he gets out there, but he crawls out with fear and trepidation. Either way both guys have succeeded in expressing their trust that the ice is going to hold them up. They are putting their faith in the ice. But if that ice is only a couple of inches thick, confident faith verses weak faith just does not matter. Both guys are going through. What matters is not the strength of their faith. What matters is the strength of the ice.

When you jump into God's arms, the question is not, "How confidently did you get there?" The question is, "How strong are those arms? How committed is God to his own promise?" And he is this committed, "But God demonstrates his own love for toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us (Romans 5:8)." God has declared, "Come to me and believe. You are safe. I have declared that if you break covenant with me, I will die. You are safe in my promise."

Reflection Questions

1. What stands out to you as you read Genesis 12:1-3? What do you notice as interesting or important or strange or confusing? What questions come to mind?
2. Can you relate to the idea of Abraham receiving a wonderful promise and responding with faith, and yet not fully comprehending what lies ahead? How does that relate to your own experience, walking with God?
3. What stands out to you as you read Genesis 15? What do you notice as interesting or important or strange or confusing? What questions come to mind?
4. How do you interpret Abraham's questions in verses 2-3 and verse 8? Does that sound like faith to you?
5. Does your own experience of faith resonate with Abraham's how questions?
6. How do you feel personally about struggling through faith with God, expressing doubts to God, or expressing doubts in front of other Christians? If such expression of doubts makes you uncomfortable, why do you think that is? If you feel freedom to express your doubts and worries to God and other believers, why do you think that is?
7. How do you answer the first question of covenant? What makes you acceptable to be in relationship with God? How much depends on God's grace? How much on what you do?
8. How would you reword the illustration of the two guys going out onto the ice? Does it speak to you as it is? Or if you were to share it with someone else, how would you adjust it?

Lesson 5: Genesis 16-26 Abraham 2

Introduction

We are continuing on with Abraham and four covenant events in his life. In our last lesson we considered the promise made in Genesis 12 and the covenant cut in Genesis 15. In this lesson we will address the covenant sign in Genesis 17 and the covenant test in Genesis 22. To set us up for the covenant sign and the covenant test, I want to follow-up on the theme of faith we addressed in our last lesson.

The weak or human side of Abraham's faith came out in Genesis 15. Twice God restated his promise from Genesis 12 and twice Abraham questioned God: "How will I have a son?" and "How will I get land?" The words and behavior of a person can be interpreted in various ways. Is this the cry of faith or is this the loss of faith? Often biblical narrative leaves us to interpret the state of a person's heart as the story unfolds. What does God say? What does God do? What are the consequences? The unfolding of the narrative gives insight into the state of a person's heart and mind. In Genesis 15, God's response of encouragement to Abraham suggests that Abraham's questions came from a place of belief.

In this particular case, we get additional help from Scripture. Paul wrote in Romans 4:19-21,

"And without becoming weak in faith [Abraham] contemplated his own body, now as good as dead since he was about a hundred years old, and the deadness of Sarah's womb; yet, with respect to the promise of God, he did not waver in unbelief, but grew strong in faith, giving glory to God, being fully assured that what he had promised, he was able also to perform."

Now, Paul's personal opinion, as a believer, scholar, theologian, missionary, would certainly be worth considering. Paul's opinion recorded in one of his New Testament letters is even more valuable. This is inspired interpretation. This is no longer merely Paul's opinion. This is God's perspective on Abraham's faith communicated through Paul. The Bible is our first and best commentary on the Bible.

Paul says a couple of things here. First, he says that Abraham was able to contemplate the hopelessness of his situation without "becoming weak in faith." Second, he says that it is "with respect to the promise of God [that] he did not waver in unbelief." And third he says that Abraham was not static in his faith, but "grew strong in faith." Abraham's faith journey does not give us the formula of faith because there is no exact formula. This is individual relationship with God, not chemistry. His life does not give us a formula. It gives us a model to consider and learn from.

As interpreters we have the challenge of considering how the life of Abraham matches up with these words from Paul. It is not always an obvious match. Paul seems to present a stronger picture than I see in Genesis. Abraham questions God. Abraham presents his wife with half-truths to protect himself. Abraham gets Hagar pregnant to produce an heir. This all looks like weakness of faith to me.

On the other hand, Abraham picked up and moved from a safe place to an unknown place based only on the word he got from God. He consistently built altars at which to worship. When Lot's eyes look for the best part of the land, Abraham's eyes look to God. When the kings of Sodom and Gomorrah offer Abraham reward, Abraham refuses, saying, "I have sworn to Yahweh, God most high, possessor of heaven and earth that I will not take a thread or a sandal thong or anything that is yours, lest you should say, 'I have made Abram rich (Genesis 14:22).'"

This last one is especially revealing to me because it happens right before the questioning in Genesis 15. Abraham's faith comes out in his public response. Then when it is just he and God, Abraham let's out his emotion. He is courageous before men and vulnerable before God. That sounds like real faith to me.

And this is a great question to consider. Go through the life of Abraham and ask, “What does faith look like when it is worked out through a life journey with God? What human ups and downs should be expected? What does it mean to stay true?”

Here are a couple of thoughts from me. The first point from Paul is that Abraham did not become weak in the faith as a result of the hopelessness surrounding him. This does not mean that Abraham was not afraid. And it does not mean that he did not make some bad choices. It does not mean that he did not sin. I think we can say that Abraham showed human weakness, even if he never gave up on the promise. He never weakened his commitment to the core truth God had communicated. “You will have a promised child. And through him the nations will be blessed.”

Even with the lies about Sarah and sleeping with Hagar, while these events communicate sin and fear and fleshly independence, it is possible that they still come from a core conviction about the promise. And though implied by the original call and the repeated mentioning of her barrenness, God did not specifically say the son must be through Sarah, at least not before the sin with Hagar. Sex with Hagar is not necessarily a denial of the promise but possibly faith in the promise exercised through fleshly independence. Abraham acts on his own to bring about the promise he believes in.

Paul’s second point emphasizes that it is with “respect to the promise” that Abraham does not waver. There are all kinds of things in life that I worry about. And I sin. And I try to help God out. And there is a lot I am not sure about. And I think in spite of all that I can say that I have not wavered in this one thing. Jesus is my hope. I have no other hope. Jesus is my anchor. The gospel is my touchstone.

Do you know what it means to say something is a touchstone? I think we usually mean it is the thing which keeps us grounded to reality. Literally, a touchstone is a type of stone used for testing the purity of precious metals such as gold or silver. When gold is rubbed across a touchstone it leaves a streak that reveals the quality of the gold.

For me, there is so much I am not sure about but the gospel of Jesus, that is not one of those things. It is at the very center of my core conviction. I filter all other truth through the gospel. It keeps me grounded. It helps me test other beliefs. It’s what I always come back to. It’s my touchstone.

In Abraham’s walk with God, the revealed truth of the promise provided a touchstone for him to test all other experiences. The promise helped him evaluate his own faith approach. The use of the touchstone is not an exact science. It is a hard task to walk through life with God. Often, we do not see our mistakes until after we have made them, and then we re-evaluate. Abraham kept coming back to Yahweh and the promise. This is what he knew to be true.

And it is worth noticing the third thing Paul said, “Abraham grew in faith.” Saying that he was not weak in faith and did not waver in regard to the promise is not the same thing as saying that he started off as a spiritual giant. Abraham began with faith, but he also had a lot of room to grow in faith. Sometimes he fixed his eyes on Yahweh and correctly applied the promise. At other times he failed badly but still came back to Yahweh and re-evaluated. In the same way for us, being committed in faith to Jesus and the gospel does not mean we understand half of everything correctly or will always choose to walk in the Spirit. Even as we cling to Jesus, we still make mistakes and still have room, like Abraham, to grow in faith.

Without denying his struggles, Paul recognizes that Abraham had a core commitment to Yahweh and his promise. And while insisting that Abraham never gave up on that promise, Paul allows that Abraham grew over time.

Let’s turn now to the next two covenant moments in the life of Abraham to see how his faith continues to play out in relationship with God.

Genesis 17

Considering the covenant sign in Genesis 17 we still do not have the promised son. We have seen Abraham struggle to understand how God is going to give him that son. God here makes it crystal

clear that the promised son is to come from Sarah. At the same time, God gives Abraham a specific stipulation to go along with the covenant that has already been cut.

The importance of this encounter is highlighted literarily through the elaborate structure of the account. Like Genesis 15 there is a pattern to the text. The pattern here is chiasitic, meaning that the first and last section of the text are parallel. The second and second to last section are parallel. The third and third to last section are parallel. And so on. Genesis 17 has 6 parallel frames with a middle section.

The structure of the text

I'll read just the first 3 verses to give us an idea of the text and then explain the structure. This is Genesis 17:1-3.

¹ Now when Abram was ninety-nine years old, the LORD appeared to Abram and said to him, "I am God Almighty; Walk before Me, and be blameless. ² "I will establish My covenant between Me and you, And I will multiply you exceedingly." ³ Abram fell on his face, and God talked with him, saying,

The beginning frame and ending frame in verse 1a and verses 24-25 both refer to Abraham and his age of 99 years. The end adds that Ishmael is 13 years. The second frame is in 1b where the text says, "the Lord appeared to Abram" and is parallel to 22b where we are told, "God went up from Abraham." The third frame is in 1c where it says, "and said to him" which is parallel to 22 where we are told God "finished talking with him." All three elements come together in this way, "When Abraham was 99 the Lord appeared and spoke to him." And then notice how the same three things are said in reverse order at the end. "God stopped talking and went up from Abraham when he was 99."

So far this is just setting the stage in a stylistically pleasing way. Abraham's age lets us know this was 24 years after the promise was made and 1 year before his 100th birthday. Since we are also told that Ishmael is 13 and Ishmael was not around in Genesis 15, we know the covenant sign is being given at least 13 years and 9 months after covenant was cut. It is also made clear to us that this is one of those special moments in the life of Abraham when God appears and God speaks.

A Abraham 99 (1a)

B The LORD appears (1b)

C God speaks (1c)

D First speech (1d-2)

E Abraham falls on his face (3a)

F Second speech (name-change, nations, kings) (4-8)

X THIRD SPEECH (9-14)

F' Fourth speech (name-change, nations, kings) (15-16)

E' Abraham falls on his face (17)

D' Fifth speech (19-21)

C' God ceases speaking (22a)

B' God goes up from him (22b)

A' Abraham 99 and Ishmael 13 (24-25)

(Wenham, *WBC Genesis 16-50*, 17)

The fourth frame gets us into the meat of the dialogue. There are going to be five short speeches separated by Abraham falling on his face in worship. The first speech in 1d-2 parallels the fifth speech in 19-21. Then we have Abraham falling on his face in both 3a and 17. Then the second speech in 4-8 parallels the fourth speech in 15-16. And speech number 3 comes at the center of the structure in 9-14.

So, this is what we have in the three sets of speeches. Let's go through the three sets of speeches.

Speeches 1 and 5

In speeches 1 and 5 God promises to establish his covenant. First, we have in 1d-2:

"I am God Almighty; Walk before Me, and be blameless. ² "I will **establish My covenant** between Me and you, And I will multiply you exceedingly."

Then we have in 19-21:

¹⁹ But God said, "No, but Sarah your wife will bear you a son, and you shall call his name Isaac; and I will **establish My covenant** [see, there is that same language] with him for an everlasting covenant for his descendants after him. ²⁰ "As for Ishmael, I have heard you; behold, I will bless him, and will make him fruitful and will multiply him exceedingly. He shall become the father of twelve princes, and I will make him a great nation. ²¹ "But **My covenant I will establish with Isaac**, whom Sarah will bear to you at this season next year."

In this fifth speech God makes very clear that the covenant is through Isaac the son of Sarah. Ishmael will be blessed, but the covenant is with Isaac. Also notice that in the first speech we get the first hint at stipulations in the covenant. In chapter 15 Abraham is passive during the cutting of covenant, and no expectations are placed on him. Here in verse 1 God says, "Walk before me and be blameless." Those are expectations and we are going to come back to that.

Speeches 2 and 4

I will let you read speeches 2 and 4 later for yourself. They occur in 4-8 and 15-16. The parallelism is very apparent. In the second speech God changes Abram's name which is "exalted father" to Abraham which is "father of a multitude." God also promises that nations and kings will come from him. Then in the fourth speech we have the same, but in relation to Sarah. Her name is changed from Sarai to Sarah, both of which mean princess. And she shall be mother of nations and kings.

We have this development from the first half of the chiasm to the second half. The first half in verses 1-8 reaffirm the promises made to Abraham with the added call to "walk before me and be blameless." The second half, starting in verse 15, now makes absolutely clear that the promise will be fulfilled through Sarah's future son Isaac.

Speech 3

The third speech takes center place in the narrative. This is where we get the sign of circumcision. This is the first specific stipulation of the Abrahamic covenant. Let's read part of that speech, verses 9-11.

⁹ God said further to Abraham, "Now as for you, you shall keep My covenant, you and your descendants after you throughout their generations. ¹⁰ "This is My covenant, which you shall keep, between Me and you and your descendants after you: every male among you shall be circumcised. ¹¹ "And you shall be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskin, and it shall be the sign of the covenant between Me and you.

Circumcision is not just one of many commands. Circumcision is a special command. It is a sign. We should then ask, "In what way does circumcision serve as a sign?" We could understand circumcision as a sign that marks male Jews physically. We could also understand circumcision as a ritual, providing some kind of action by which Jewish parents can signal their commitment to covenant relationship with God. These are both ways by which circumcision serves as a sign. It is a physical mark and a ritual action. But there is more. Circumcision also communicates symbolically.

We have learned that covenants are not made. They are cut. Circumcision is a cutting ceremony. Most male boys will grow up, leave father and mother, cleave to their wife, and become head of their own household. And whenever one of these potential heads of a household is born, his parents make an oath on his behalf. Because this has to do with heads of households and future descendants, this oath is connected to the male reproductive organ. And being the oath of covenant, it is a curse. Through this cutting of covenant, the parents of the current household are proclaiming

on this head of a future household, if he grows up to break covenant with Yahweh, to turn his back on God and walk away from him, then let him be cut off from the covenant community and let his seed, his descendants, be cut off. That's the cutting of covenant. Circumcision is a calling of a curse down on the descendants of those children who would walk away from God.

Along with the symbolic of curse of cutting. We later learn there is a symbolic blessing. It is the idea of having a circumcised heart. It is the cutting off of the sinful human flesh, so that we might walk with God out of a heart of love for him. Moses uses that language of the circumcised heart in Deuteronomy 30:6. This idea of blessing and curse is not foreign to us who are under the New Covenant. Baptism symbolizes both death and life, both curse and blessing. Going under the water we are baptized into the death of Christ. We are united with him in the curse that he took for us. So, we are crucified with him in his death. Coming back up out of the water symbolizes the new life that we now live in him, the blessing of new life.

The Two Questions of Covenant

Before moving on to the covenant test, let's address that issue I said I would come back to. We could jump right into Genesis 17, without considering what has already taken place, and read these words, "Walk before me, and be blameless. And I will establish my covenant between me and you, and I will multiply you exceedingly." And we could conclude that this is a works-based covenant. That's what this sounds like. If you walk before me in a way that is blameless, then I will establish my covenant and then I will multiply you. But if we came to that conclusion, we would be making the very normal mistake of confusing the two questions of covenant. The first of which has already been established for us in the earlier cutting of covenant moment in Genesis 15.

The first question of covenant is, "What makes me acceptable to be in covenant relationship with a holy God?" God could answer that question with a whole range of stipulations, things we have to do to be acceptable. It could just be the ten commandments. But he did not do that. What stipulations did Abraham have to meet in Genesis 15 before righteousness was reckoned to him? None. Not one. Abraham was dead asleep, completely passive, when God himself walked through the cut sacrifices. God proclaimed that he would take on himself the curse of broken covenant. Abraham's part was simply to believe in God. He believed and it was reckoned to him as righteousness.

Paul tells us in Romans 4 that we should not miss the distance between Genesis 15 and Genesis 17. God intentionally waited over a decade to communicate covenant stipulations. This is Romans 4:9-11, "For we say, 'Faith was reckoned to Abraham as righteousness.' How then was it reckoned? While he was circumcised, or uncircumcised? Not while circumcised, but while uncircumcised; and he received the sign of circumcision, a seal of the righteousness of the faith which he had while uncircumcised." The question of acceptability or righteousness before a holy God is accomplished 100% by grace. Stipulations added later, like circumcision, are not requirements for getting in or staying in covenant relationship with God. This is Paul's point when he goes on to say in Romans 4:14-15:

¹⁴ For if those who are of the Law are heirs, faith is made void and the promise is nullified; ¹⁵ for the Law brings about wrath, but where there is no law, there also is no violation.

Paul is arguing that anytime law is a condition, whenever stipulations are required, humans fail. The law will bring wrath. That is guaranteed. You will not live up to God's holiness. If the requirement is faith plus law then "faith is made void and the promise is nullified." A promise given to sinful human beings based on their ability to be good enough is a null promise. The conditions cannot be fulfilled. We need a way where there is no law involved. So, Paul says in the next verse,

¹⁶ For this reason [the promise is] by faith, in order that *it may be* in accordance with grace, so that the promise will be guaranteed to all the descendants.

We must not confuse the two questions of covenant. The first question of what makes us acceptable or righteous is grace alone, 100% grace. There is then a second question, which is, "Being accepted

into covenant relationship with God, how then should I live.” This is the question that Genesis 17:1 applies to. Being in covenant relationship with God, Abraham is now being told how God expects him to live out that covenant. God expects Abraham to walk with him and to pursue blamelessness. And within the covenant relationship the believer’s obedience does matter. Failing to walk with God affects our experience of life with God. Our behavior affects the blessing that comes from pursuing life as life is meant to be pursued. I can stick ice cream in my ear, but I cannot rightly be mad at the ice cream man if I don’t like the feeling ice cream in my ear or if I get sick as a result. I am not using the blessing of ice cream as it was intended to be used. Blessing comes from doing life as life is meant to be done. And that has to do with walking with God and pursuing blamelessness. If I do not walk through life with God, I cannot blame him that I miss out on the intended blessings of life. The fulness of life is found in God. If I turn another way, that’s on me.

On top of that, I cannot blame God for disciplining me when I stubbornly insist on living in a way that dishonors him and hurts other people. Even when I am firm in my relationship with God by grace, I can still grieve my heavenly father just as any child can. But these are second question issues. Assuming that I have already placed my faith in God and entered into relationship with him, these are issues about “How I we live out this relationship I already have?” Failure to live out the covenant cannot be the basis for acceptance into the covenant. None of us would last out the day.

Let’s shift our attention now to that final covenant event in Abraham’s life in Genesis 22.

Genesis 22

Though, right after the covenant sign is given, God promises that Isaac will be born in a year, Abraham’s life does not continue on as one smooth blessing. After the guarantee of Isaac’s birth, Sodom and Gomorrah are destroyed. That might have just been a somber moment of justice on evil people, but it turns out to be personally tragic for Abraham when the wife of his nephew Lot dies. Tragedy turns to scandal when, in desperation, Lot’s daughters trick him to commit incest. After that we get Abraham’s second time of lying about Sarah. Then there is conflict in the family as Sarah turns against Hagar and her son Ishmael. Whoever said the life of faith would be easy? All this struggle, all this struggle and mess certainly could have led Abraham to re-evaluate his perspective on the original promise of good news given in Genesis 12. By the time we get to chapter 22, I can imagine Abraham looking back over 35 years of walking with God and seeing the promise of good news with very different eyes. It is the same promise. But Abraham is not the same man. His commitment to the promise continues unwavering, but with much deeper appreciation of what he has in his relationship with God.

At the end of Genesis 21, we find Abraham at Beersheba. He has made a covenant with Abimelech. He has dug a well. He has planted a tree. That sounds to me like a man ready to settle down. He even calls on the name of Yahweh in a new way, calling him the Everlasting God. He has passed through so much. And now he seems to have found a place of peace. But before he settles down in a place of rest, God has something for Abraham to do, a test. The command comes in 22:1-4.

22:1-4

¹ Now it came about after these things, that God tested Abraham, and said to him, “Abraham!” And he said, “Here I am.” ² He said, “Take now your son, your only son, whom you love, Isaac, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains of which I will tell you.” ³ So Abraham rose early in the morning and saddled his donkey, and took two of his young men with him and Isaac his son; and he split wood for the burnt offering, and arose and went to the place of which God had told him. ⁴ On the third day Abraham raised his eyes and saw the place from a distance.

I cannot imagine God giving the Abraham of Genesis 12 the command to sacrifice Isaac. Abraham would have thought Yahweh truly wanted child sacrifice. But this Abraham of Genesis 22 has walked with God over 30 years. He has come to know the character of God and has learned one thing for sure about the promise child. It is Isaac. God allowed Abraham to struggle towards this realization

until with the giving of the covenant sign, he made it absolutely clear, the child will come from Sarah and his name will be Isaac.

Abraham would have taken this command to sacrifice Isaac, and he would have tested it against the touchstone of the promise. The command would have been filtered through that core conviction. We have seen Abraham struggle with God. He questioned God prior to the cutting of covenant. He asked God to accept Ishmael. He pleaded with God to spare Sodom and Gomorrah. Abraham does not have a problem interacting with and arguing with God. But here, when asked to give his son Isaac as a burnt offering, he doesn't say anything. He doesn't ask for God to spare Isaac. Why not? Abraham seems to be in tune with God's leading here. He trusts God in the promise. So, he is able to simply obey. Verses 5-8 give more insight into Abraham's mind.

22:5-8

⁵ Abraham said to his young men, "Stay here with the donkey, and I and the lad will go over there; and we will worship and return to you." ⁶ Abraham took the wood of the burnt offering and laid it on Isaac his son, and he took in his hand the fire and the knife. So the two of them walked on together. ⁷ Isaac spoke to Abraham his father and said, "My father!" And he said, "Here I am, my son." And he said, "Behold, the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for the burnt offering?" ⁸ Abraham said, "God will provide for Himself the lamb for the burnt offering, my son." So the two of them walked on together.

Abraham knows that he is coming off the mountain with Isaac. He tells the servants to wait until he comes back with the boy. Fortunately, if we are not sure that we are interpreting the narrative correctly here, Hebrews 11:17-19 gives us another one of those inspired interpretations so that we can know for sure Abraham's state of mind. It says this,

¹⁷ By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac, and he who had received the promises was offering up his only begotten son; ¹⁸ *it was he* to whom it was said, "IN ISAAC YOUR DESCENDANTS SHALL BE CALLED." ¹⁹ He considered that God is able to raise *people* even from the dead, from which he also received him back as a type.

I do not think this means that Abraham proceeded on without any worry or fear or emotional struggle. Jesus knew the joy set before him, and yet, his sweat turned to blood as he anguished in the garden the night before his death. I expect that Abraham's deep trust in God existed in tension with his love as a father and the struggle of doing what was required of him.

Abraham placed his faith in the character of God and the promise of God. That trust was well-placed. Listen to verses 8-14.

22:8-14

⁹ Then they came to the place of which God had told him; and Abraham built the altar there and arranged the wood, and bound his son Isaac and laid him on the altar, on top of the wood. ¹⁰ Abraham stretched out his hand and took the knife to slay his son. ¹¹ But the angel of the LORD called to him from heaven and said, "Abraham, Abraham!" And he said, "Here I am." ¹² He said, "Do not stretch out your hand against the lad, and do nothing to him; for now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from Me." ¹³ Then Abraham raised his eyes and looked, and behold, behind *him* a ram caught in the thicket by his horns; and Abraham went and took the ram and offered him up for a burnt offering in the place of his son. ¹⁴ Abraham called the name of that place The LORD Will Provide, as it is said to this day, "In the mount of the LORD it will be provided."

God holds off until after Abraham binds Isaac and reaches out to pick up the knife. As a dad, I can only hope that Isaac thought they were role playing, that he never got to the level of fear that his father actually intended to sacrifice him. That's my hope. We are not told, so I'll trust God with that. Whatever God wanted for Isaac, I am sure he accomplished for Isaac.

With Abraham, I see God doing at least three things here. First, this is another monument of grace in the Law. During the cutting of covenant, God took the curse on himself. That was our first monument. Here again, though we each deserve to die for our sins, God is showing us that he will provide a substitute. This is a symbol of the atonement. It is a monument of grace.

I think God is doing something else here as well. He could have communicated the idea of a substitute without requiring Abraham to be so emotionally invested in the symbol. There are other ways, like putting the blood of a lamb on your doorposts. But God set up this test in a way that would bring all the father love of Abraham to the forefront. Even believing his child could be raised from the dead, Abraham comes to the point of emotional anguish of actually having to sacrifice his own son. He is right at the edge. I believe God set this up to allow Abraham to somehow be lifted up into the experience of God. When God the Father walked through the covenant sacrifice and said, "Let me take the curse," he had already agreed with God the Son that God the Son must die. God's promise of grace is free to us, but it comes at incredibly cost to him. Grace requires a sacrifice that cuts deep into the father-heart of God. Through this experience Abraham has gained insight into the heart of the one who truly must give up his son in order to redeem people.

Along with the symbol of grace and Abraham's participation in the heart of God, there is also a third thing God is doing here; the test. Let's read the rest of the passage, 15-19.

22:15-18

¹⁵ Then the angel of the LORD called to Abraham a second time from heaven, ¹⁶ and said, "By Myself I have sworn, declares the LORD, because you have done this thing and have not withheld your son, your only son, ¹⁷ indeed I will greatly bless you, and I will greatly multiply your seed as the stars of the heavens and as the sand which is on the seashore; and your seed shall possess the gate of their enemies. ¹⁸ "In your seed all the nations of the earth shall be blessed, because you have obeyed My voice." ¹⁹ So Abraham returned to his young men, and they arose and went together to Beersheba; and Abraham lived at Beersheba.

God affirms the covenant, saying "Because you have done this thing...indeed I will greatly bless you..." So, we ask, "Is the promise now conditional?" God promised to Abraham in Genesis 12 that he would be a blessing. He promised him in Genesis 15 that his descendants would be as the stars in heaven and the sand on the seashore. Are we not being told that is all conditional? Would God not have blessed Abraham if Abraham refused to offer Isaac or if his will faltered at the last moment? If he couldn't pick up the knife. I do not believe so. We can take the idea of a test in two different ways. A test can be an ordeal that must be passed through as a condition for something else. Or a test can be used to reveal the true nature of something. I do not believe the promise that God made with Abraham was conditional on his ability to pass this test. I believe that this test was designed to prove or reveal the true nature of the faith Abraham already had. It is the kind of test Peter talks about in the first chapter of his first letter. This is verses 6-7,

⁶ In this you greatly rejoice, even though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been distressed by various trials, ⁷ so that the proof of your faith, *being* more precious than gold which is perishable, even though tested by fire, may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ;

Peter speaks of a faith that is tested as you would test ore by the fire. Fire burns away impurity and shows you if there is any gold in the ore. God's test of Abraham's faith reveals gold. It reveals the faith that God recognized years previously in Genesis 15:6. That faith was present then when God declared Abraham righteous by faith. The point of this test is not to see if Abraham has faith, but to reveal, to draw out, the saving faith he already possesses.

As we have considered many of the events in Abraham's life, we have had reason to wonder about his faith. But now, through this test, what we thought we were seeing is affirmed. This is a man whose faith with respect to the promise of God has not wavered. Through the ups and downs, the boldness, the weakness, the success, the sin, the good choices, the bad, he really did believe in that

core message of the promise. God was his anchor and the promise was his touchstone. And he grew in that faith. We see that here in this unique moment of testing. And he saw it himself. Abraham himself was affirmed in his own belief through this test. He sees his faith shine like gold. He is affirmed that what God has been doing through him all these years is real.

God is doing a similar work in you. He is calling you through your weakness, your courage, your fear, your sin to hold onto Jesus as your anchor and to employ his gospel as your touchstone, your test for everything else. This is the one thing we know for sure to be true; Jesus and his gospel. As we hold onto him, there will be times when we God grants us a test, so that we can see for sure that we do indeed believe. We pass through it, and we see that his work in us is real. Place your faith in his promise to you that you are saved and made acceptable by the grace of Jesus. Believe that gospel. Believe in Jesus. Then walk with him pursuing the life he has designed for you, and you cannot help but be changed.

Reflection Questions

1. What stands out to you as you read Genesis 17? What do you notice as interesting or important or strange or confusing? What questions come to mind?
2. What do you make of Abraham laughing and crying out for God to accept Ishmael as the promised child in Genesis 17:17-18? And what do you make of God's comments to Sarah regarding her laughter in 18:9-15? How do you see human reaction mixed with faith and doubt working out in these two situations?
3. Abraham calls Sarah his sister again in chapter 20, this time to a ruler in Canaan, Abimelech. Does this contradict that idea that Abraham grew over the years in faith? How do you understand this repetition of weakness?
4. What stands out to you as you read Genesis 22? What do you notice as interesting or important or strange or confusing? What questions come to mind?
5. How do you understand God's words in 16-17, "...because you have done this thing, and have not withheld your son, your only son, indeed I will greatly bless you, and I will greatly multiply your seed..."? Was the blessing conditional on Abraham's obedience? What would Abraham have missed out on if he did not obey God in sacrificing Isaac?

Lesson 6: Genesis 23-35 Isaac and Jacob

Introduction

Our simple outline of Genesis divides the book into two parts. Chapters 1-11 focus on all humanity and the four events of Creation, Fall, Flood and Nations. Chapters 12-50 focus on one family and the four people Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph. I gave two lessons to Abraham, the father of our faith, to whom God made the promise. Now I am going to speed it up a bit by covering the stories of Isaac and Jacob with one shot. I will use the narrative of Isaac to set up our covenant context. And then I will focus on the narrative of Jacob, the story of a son of believing parents who struggles to come to terms with his faith heritage.

We start with Isaac.

Isaac's Story

According to the genealogy or generations structure of Genesis, the narrative of Isaac does not stand out on its own. Isaac's story is a bridge overlapping Abraham's story and Jacob's story. Remember that Moses gave us 10 genealogies in Genesis. My Bible uses the word generations. We started with the generations of heaven and earth in 2:4. Then we had the generations of Adam and then the generations of Noah, the generations of Shem, Ham and Japheth, then just the generations of Shem all the way down to Terah. Some of these generations statements are lists of descendants with just a little bit of narrative commentary. Others, like the generations of Terah, introduce a story. And that story is not usually about the one named, but about one of the sons of the one named. The generations of Terah, for example, introduces not the story of Terah but the story of his son Abraham.

Following that pattern, we might expect to encounter somewhere the phrase, "These are the records of the generations of Abraham," which would then lead into the story of Isaac. That is not going to happen. We find the narrative of Isaac included at the end of Abraham's story and then at the beginning of Jacob's story. And that is Genesis 24-26.

Isaac and Doublets

One thing we learn from Isaac's story is that in the Ancient Near East, the best place to find a wife is at a well. Apparently, it happens a lot. We are going to see it repeated. Narrative repetitions like this are sometimes called doublets. Abraham lies about Sarah not once but twice. Then Isaac is going to lie about Rebekah. Some scholars argue that these doublets exist because the details of some original story have been confused or mixed up or intentionally changed. The story then gets attached to two different people or events at two different points on somebody's timeline. That's how they explain doublets in the narrative, one story that has been repeated.

And that does seem to make a lot of sense. Because what man would ever commit the same exact sin twice in his life? And what son would ever repeat the sin of his father? That's my problem with the scholarly skepticism about doublets. It is in fact quite believable that a man would mess up in the same way twice and that a son would make the same mistakes as his father, even after he says, "I am never going to be like my father." And then he goes and acts just like his father. Nobody is surprised by that in real life. And this kind of repetition in real life is exactly the kind of story you would want to include in a person's biography if you are writing the biography. It is both interesting and telling. With Abraham it is telling that a man secure in his belief in the promise of God and a man who is growing in his faith would also be a man who continues to struggle and sins in the exact same way as he did when he was a new believer. That tells us something about the struggle of sin in the life of faith. These two realities exist in tension, children of God mature in their faith and children of God continue to struggle with sin. The sin of Isaac lying about Rebekah is also telling. We see that sin is not only passed on through birth but is also socialized into children. Our sinful habits, inclinations, and responses can be picked up and carried on by our sons and daughters. That's just reality.

Not all doublets are bad examples. The repetition of finding a woman at a well is a positive repetition. Robert Alter describes the bride at the well as a motif similar to a western gunfight scene (*The Art of Biblical Narrative*). It is a known literary idea that has some expected elements, like high noon and twitchy fingers, a good guy and a bad guy. You just mention the gunfight scene and an expected picture comes to mind. The literary artist uses the scene to bring up something expected. So, we can immediately imagine a well and a man at the well and a woman coming to get water at the well. And then that literary artist takes that and uses it to highlight something that is different. Even though there is similarity between all these meetings at the well. There is always also differences. Here we have a servant meeting the bride at the well. In the next story, Jacob the groom will meet his bride at the well. The difference is between a servant and a son. There is also a difference in how the story plays out, the first leads to a happy ending, the second leads to struggle and strive.

Alter does not seem to care too much about whether the stories are historical. His focus is on the way the stories are used in literature. I am quite comfortable with the stories being both true and also good literature. The art of theological biography, takes interesting events in the lives of people and then, while remaining faithful to historical events, communicates the story in a way that reveals truth about God, about people, and about the world we live in. The historical nature of the stories grounds the revealed truth in real life. That is crucial in biblical narrative. This is not theoretical truth or merely psychological truth, this is truth played out in the real life events of real people.

Isaac and Covenant Renewal

There is another very important repetition in Isaac's story that we should take note of. In Genesis 26:24 we read,

The LORD appeared to him the same night and said,
"I am the God of your father Abraham;
Do not fear, for I am with you.
I will bless you, and multiply your descendants,
For the sake of My servant Abraham."

The Lord made covenant with Abraham and his descendants. Here he reaffirms that covenant directly to Isaac. When I introduce the kingdom motif, which includes a king who defines relationship with his people through covenant, I said that the covenant is communicated through a mediator. When that happens in the Bible, we call that person a covenant mediator prophet. I said that there are six covenant mediator prophets in the Bible, Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, David and Jesus. Isaac is not on the list. And yet, here we have God communicating, promising covenant with Isaac. What is a good way to understand this?

My Old Testament professor Jeffrey Niehaus argued that we should understand this as covenant renewal.² There was a parallel practice in the Ancient Near East. A suzerain or king of kings made covenant with a vassal or lesser king. If the vassal died, then the suzerain might choose to renew the covenant with the vassal's son. This new covenant may include additional stipulations but was essentially the same legal agreement extended from father to son. Let me read to you an example

² My terminology of "renewal" here misses a more precise distinction Dr. Niehaus included in his *Biblical Theology*. He considers the covenant with Isaac and Jacob to be a "reconfirmation" of the Abrahamic covenant. Dr. Niehaus sees covenant "renewal" as a covenant process which includes elements of the covenant form and a ratification of covenant. He recognizes only two covenant renewals in the Bible: the renewal of the Adamic covenant with Noah and the renewal of the Sinai covenant with the second generation on the plains of Moab (Exodus and Deuteronomy). "Reconfirmation" or "recommitment" occurs when the vassal affirms their acceptance to an existing covenant as, for example, following generations affirmed their commitment to the Mosaic covenant without an "updating" of that covenant such as we see in Deuteronomy. Jeffrey J. Niehaus. *Biblical Theology, Volume 2, The Special Grace Covenants, Old Testament*. (Wooster, Ohio: Weaver Book Company, 2017) 109-110. (Also Volume 1, 212.)

from the prologue of a 2nd millennium treaty between the Hittite suzerain Mursillis and his vassal Duppi-Tessub of Amurru.

“When my father became god and I seated myself on the throne of my father, [your grandfather] Aziras behaved toward me just as he had behaved toward my father. [...] When your father died, in accordance with your father's word I did not drop you. Since your father had mentioned to me your name with great praise, I sought after you. To be sure, you were sick and ailing, but although you were ailing, I, the Sun, put you in the place of your father and took your brothers (and) sisters and the Amurru land in oath for you. When I, the Sun, sought after you in accordance with your father's word and put you in your father's place, I took you in oath for the king of the Hatti land, the Hatti land, and for my sons and grandsons. So honor the oath (of loyalty) to the king and the king's king And I, the king, will be loyal toward you, Duppi- Tessub. When you take a wife, and when you beget an heir, he shall be king in the Amurru land likewise. And just as I shall be loyal toward you, even so shall I be loyal toward your son. But you, Duppi-Tessub, remain loyal toward the king of the Hatti land, the Hatti land, my sons (and) my grandsons forever! The tribute which was imposed upon your grandfather and your father— they presented 300 shekels of good, refined first-class gold weighed with standard weights—you shall present them likewise. Do not turn your eyes to anyone else! Your fathers presented tribute to Egypt; you [shall not do that!] (Pritchard, *ANET* 203-205).”

Several phrases catch my attention here, like how high an opinion Mursillis had of himself, “When my father became a god” and “I the Sun”; and the low opinion he had of Duppi-Tessub, “To be sure, you were sick and ailing,”; and his concern about the gold tribute being just right, “300 shekels of good, refined, first-class gold weighed with standard weights.” He really wanted to make sure he did not get cheated on his tribute.

For now, our concern is about the language of covenant renewal. Mursillis said that he had made covenant with Duppi-Tessub's father and upon the death of his father, Mursillis now offers renewal of that covenant to Duppi-Tessub and also to his sons after him. Covenant renewal, like this, provides a helpful parallel for us as we consider the operation of biblical covenants. God made a covenant with Abraham. Now he is simply renewing that covenant with Isaac. And after Isaac, he will renew that covenant with Jacob. We do not have three different covenants with three different covenant mediators. We have one covenant made through Abraham, being renewed with his son and later his grandson. There are three expressions of covenant, but together they make up one legal package.

This concept will help us later on with the more complicated covenants made on Mt. Sinai and in the book of Deuteronomy. The Sinai covenant was cut with the first generation of Israel to come out of Egypt. Deuteronomy is a second law in the sense that it is a restatement of the first covenant made with the second generation to come out of Egypt. The first is for the fathers and mothers, the second is for the sons and daughters. There are additions to the second covenant, but the two covenants together create one legal package. Much later there will be significant difference between the Mosaic Covenant and the New Covenant. Each has their own covenant mediator because they are not one legal package. The New Covenant is not a renewal. It is a new covenant.

So, back to Isaac. After God makes the promise of covenant renewal with Isaac, the next verse implies Isaac's personal commitment to the covenant. This is 26:25.

²⁵ So he built an altar there and called upon the name of the LORD, and pitched his tent there; and there Isaac's servants dug a well.

Isaac did not just pick up bad habits from his father. Just like Abraham built altars and worshipped God, so we see Isaac doing the same here.

There is more to the story of Isaac, more that I would like to talk about. But I am going to leave that to you to look into. Since we are doing a survey of the whole Pentateuch, we need to move on to his son Jacob.

Jacob's Story

Grasping after birthright and blessing

The story of Jacob begins in Genesis 25:19 with another genealogy statement, "Now these are the records of the generations of Isaac." So, it is not going to be about Isaac. It is going to be about his son Jacob. The tale starts with Jacob's birth which foreshadows his life. He comes out of the womb grasping on to the heel of his brother. In spite of the promise of God that accompanied his arrival, Jacob is going to wrestle his way through life to grasp hold of that blessing himself for himself. Jacob's struggle is compounded by the weaknesses of his believing parents. Genesis 25:28, right after the birth story, tells us, "Now Isaac loved Esau, because he had a taste for game; but Rebekah loved Jacob." Isaac loves the hunter, and Rebekah loves the cook. And that kind of favoritism among the parents never really helps out the children.

The parents do deserve their right share of blame. But the sons bear the responsibility of their own actions. So, the next story in Genesis 25 gives some insight into their character. Jacob takes advantage of Esau's rash nature by withholding food from him until he gives up his birthright. Jacob does not accept Esau's first word for it but requires him to swear an oath. Esau agrees, and he swears, giving over his birthright. We are given a direct, negative statement about Esau that he "despised his birthright." And we should understand, in light of God's covenant with Abraham and Isaac, that Esau is not only despising the material gain of his birthright but also his spiritual heritage. He is giving up being the first born of the covenant. And though he likely does not understand what he is really giving up, he does not respect his parents enough to prize the spiritual inheritance they have to offer.

Jacob does not come out of the story all nice and shiny. He comes off as manipulative. The promise was made for him to receive the blessing. God does not need him to help out. But this is his nature. He is grasping after it.

Next, we get the covenant renewal with Isaac in Genesis 26. Remember I said that Isaac is used as a bridge from Abraham's story to Jacob's. Biblical authors often link or overlap two stories. We saw this back in Genesis 1 and 2 with the stories from the creation where the second story goes backwards first to give us more detail about the creation of man and woman. So, we had everything created in chapter 1, but then chapter 2 starts back without Adam and has him created and then without Eve, and then she is created. The way it works here is like this. We have the narrative of Abraham then part of Isaac's story then the death of Abraham concluding his story. Then we have a genealogy statement showing us we are transitioning to a new narrative chapter. This one starts with the birth of Jacob, gives us the rest of Isaac's story and then continues with the narrative of Jacob. So, it is this pattern is Abraham, Isaac, Abraham, Jacob Isaac, Jacob.

So, we have started the narrative of Jacob and are now getting the renewal of covenant with Isaac, which I have already described. And the result of this overlapping is that we get the renewal of covenant with Isaac sandwiched between the story of Jacob grasping Esau's birthright and the story of Jacob grasping Esau's blessing. In the first story Jacob is sneaky. In the second story he is outright deceptive. And we have to admit that both of his parents share some culpability.

Isaac allows his love for his first-born Esau to overshadow his commitment to the word of the Lord that came at the twin's birth. He is determined to give Esau the blessing due a first-born son. It is important to Isaac. And we see that. He wants to set it up right. So, he tells Esau to go get a fresh kill. And then bring it back and make that kind of stew I like. We are going to have a feast. And then I am going to bless you. He says in 27:4, "and prepare a savory dish for me such as I love, and bring it to me that I may eat, so that my soul may bless you before I die." This is serious to Isaac both in the set-up required and also in his words. He says, "so my soul may bless you." The blessing is to come from a deep, spiritual place in Isaac, from his soul.

We know the story well from here. Similar to how Sarah urges Abraham to help God out by getting Hagar pregnant, Rebekah urges Jacob to help God out by stealing the blessing God had already

promised. Jacob's character comes off looking worse than Abraham as he dresses up like his brother to trick his old, blind father. That is not cool, but it works. And Isaac pronounces this blessing over him, Genesis 27:29,

May peoples serve you,
And nations bow down to you;
Be master of your brothers,
And may your mother's sons bow down to you.
Cursed be those who curse you,
And blessed be those who bless you.

We hear in this blessing both the language God used at Jacob's birth and also the language of the covenant promise. Remember that Isaac thinks this is Esau he is blessing. He thinks he is passing on the covenant promise to his first born. When Isaac and Esau realize what has happened, Esau asks for blessing, but Isaac says in 27:37, "Behold, I have made him your master, and all his relatives I have given to him as servants...Now as for you then, what can I do my son?" It seems that Isaac believes himself bound by the legal nature of the blessing proclaimed on Jacob. I wonder also if he experienced conviction from God because he knew the blessing was supposed to go to Jacob in the first place. So, he decides to stick to it.

Esau, not a man to be sensitive to the will of God, harbors a murderous grudge against Jacob. He is just going to wait for Isaac to die, and then he is going to kill Jacob. Knowing this, Rebekah comes up with a plan to send Jacob far away, telling Isaac that she wants him to go find a wife from among her relatives who live up north in Mesopotamia. The sending away happens in Genesis 28. And this is an important chapter both for Isaac, so let's focus in on the text.

The Struggle of Believing Parents

First, let me pause and say that this family really provides us with an interesting example of how faith works in sinful human beings. We have just seen the conflict in Isaac as he chooses to bless Esau with words that express confidence in the Abrahamic promise and yet go contrary to God's express choice of Jacob. Isaac seems to have repented of his insistence on Esau and is now recognizing the promise going forward through Jacob. And he says at the beginning of chapter 28 in verses 3-4,

³ "May God Almighty bless you and make you fruitful and multiply you, that you may become a company of peoples. ⁴ "May He also give you the blessing of Abraham, to you and to your descendants with you, that you may possess the land of your sojournings, which God gave to Abraham."

In spite of his favoritism of Esau, Isaac now links the promise of both land and descendants to his son Jacob. So, we have this picture of a believing father who still struggles to trust God's plan when it comes to his sons.

We have also seen the struggle of the mother Rebekah. Her desire for Jacob to be blessed is not solely faith in the promise. She prefers Jacob. She wants to protect him, to mother him. Her desire for him to marry a believing wife sounds spiritual, but it is also motivated by her dislike of Esau's wives and her fear for Jacob. We see that this believing mother also has her own challenges in trusting God with her children.

The brother Esau has not shown any interest in God or the promise. He wants material things. He wants blessing but does not show he wants God. He marries Canaanite women without concern for how this might affect his own worldview or the faith of his future children.

Jacob himself has shown no commitment to God. He wants what God has promised, the birthright and blessing. But he does not trust God to provide these things for him. He feels like he must grasp it himself. We have not heard him say or seen him do anything that affirms faith in God. His will is not submitted to Yahweh as Lord of his life. The promise is not a touchstone for him to view life by as he presents himself in service of his great King. And while his parents have faith that is imperfect, Jacob

knows the right words without personally submitting to and trusting God on his own. His faith is not real.

This is a messy family. Not unlike maybe your own family or unlike the families that fill our churches. This family affirms the reality that God has no grandchildren. Being born into a believing family does not guarantee faith in the sons and daughters. They must come to that on their own. And the behavior of the believing parents does not always point children in the right direction.

Isaac communicates words of faith to Jacob as he sets out. But it will be many, many years before Jacob yields to that faith himself. I see Jacob as the son who never quite lets go of the faith but never quite yields either. I don't know if you have a son like that or know a son like that. He is the son who struggles, willing to go to church, never voicing rejection of God, willing to be prayed for, yet regularly getting into this life problem or that life problem, driven by his desires, driven by unwise decisions, sometimes staying on a good path for a while and then straying off again. He never quite gets dependence on God or true relationship with God. For some reason he just can't be consistent with God. That is how I see Jacob.

God Initiates and Jacob Promises

Having set off to find a wife in Haran, Jacob stops, lies down to sleep, and dreams of a ladder from heaven to earth on which angels ascend and descend. It is as though a way of direct communication has been opened up to heaven. And in the dream God, himself, renews covenant with Jacob, saying in 28:13-14,

"I am the LORD, the God of your father Abraham and the God of Isaac; the land on which you lie, I will give it to you and to your descendants. Your descendants will also be like the dust of the earth, and you will spread out to the west and to the east and to the north and to the south; and in you and in your descendants shall all the families of the earth be blessed."

Notice how this promise includes the purpose statement given to Abraham. Not only will Jacob be greatly blessed, but, "in your descendants shall all the families of the earth be blessed." Jacob's acknowledgment of God comes out in verse 16 as he says, "Surely Yahweh is in this place." And in verse 19, we are told that he called that place Bethel which means house of God. But we also get something very human from Jacob. Listen to this and ask yourself, what does that sound like? Does that sound like faith? This is 20-22.

²⁰ Then Jacob made a vow, saying, "If God will be with me and will keep me on this journey that I take, and will give me food to eat and garments to wear, ²¹ and I return to my father's house in safety, then the LORD will be my God. ²² "This stone, which I have set up as a pillar, will be God's house, and of all that You give me I will surely give a tenth to You."

Does that sound like faith? It sounds like a deal to me, a business arrangement. It is faith in the sense of acknowledging God's presence. But it does not sound like trust in the word of God. Jacob is running from Esau afraid. He does not know how things are going to work out. This is that kind of faith that comes out when we are in trouble. "God, if you help me out, I promise that I will not miss a Sunday of church. And I will put money in the plate every time. Just help me keep this job or get out of this mess or succeed in this endeavor. Bless me, and I will be your guy."

I made a lot about not judging Abraham too quickly when he questioned God in Genesis 15. So, let's hold off on diagnosing Jacob's spiritual state until we see how the story goes.

Jacob Meets His Match in Laban

Jacob continues on, and he arrives in Haran, and he meets Rachel at a well and discovers his match in manipulation, not Rachel, but her father Laban. Laban tricks Jacob into serving him for 14 years. And during this time God keeps his promise to Jacob. Jacob has 12 sons and prospers materially, even as Laban continues to try to make profit off of Jacob. It is not clear how righteous Jacob is in the growth of his flocks, but he does give credit to God for the blessing. He even has another dream from God reminding him of his oath. This is in Genesis 31:13, "I am the God of Bethel, where you anointed a

pillar, where you made a vow to me; now arise, leave this land, and return to the land of your birth.” In response, Jacob gathers his wives and children and flocks and sneaks out. Laban gives chase, but in the end, they separate with no conflict.

The Wrestling Match; A Life Theme

Free of Laban, Jacob now begins to fear how Esau will receive him. He sends ahead hundreds of goats, sheep, cows and donkeys as a gift. He is coming from the north. He is on the east side of the Jordan river about halfway between the Sea of Galilee and the Dead Sea. The town of Shechem is to the west across the Jordan river. And in front of him on the east side of the Jordan is the river Jabbok. Jacob sends all his livestock and servants and even family across the Jabbok.

Left alone we have one of the strangest meetings between man and God in the Bible, and oddly, perhaps one of the most normal meetings between man and God. Genesis 32:24 tells us, “Then Jacob was left alone, and a man wrestled with him until daybreak.” Why did God appear as a man and why wrestle with Jacob? I think God was treating Jacob as Jacob was treating God. Jacob has not shown himself prepared to submit to the lordship of God. He does not give himself into relationship with God. He makes deals with God, treating him as he would treat another man, albeit a very powerful man. Jacob wrestles with God to get blessing from God while maintaining control of his own life. Consider verses 25-29,

²⁵ When he saw that he had not prevailed against him, he touched the socket of his thigh; so the socket of Jacob’s thigh was dislocated while he wrestled with him. ²⁶ Then he said, “Let me go, for the dawn is breaking.” But he said, “I will not let you go unless you bless me.” ²⁷ So he said to him, “What is your name?” And he said, “Jacob.” ²⁸ He said, “Your name shall no longer be Jacob, but Israel; for you have striven with God and with men and have prevailed.” ²⁹ Then Jacob asked him and said, “Please tell me your name.” But he said, “Why is it that you ask my name?” And he blessed him there.

God does not desire to overwhelm Jacob and force him into slavery. God desires for Jacob to yield his will and enter into relationship. Dislocating his thigh, God employs suffering to motivate Jacob to yield in faith. True to form Jacob refuses. He will have the blessing from God, but he will have it on his own terms by striving with God. God gives him a new name to match that attitude, Israel, the one who strives with God. And God does bless Jacob there. But I am conflicted at how to take this. I think God invites us to wrestle with him. To wrestle with our doubts and bitterness and sense of unfairness. This is not the faith that God desires for us. It is not a willful yielding to God as the righteous and true king over our lives. But at least it is engagement. Jacob has not turned from God or denied God or even assumed everything is okay between he and God. By wrestling Jacob at least honestly acknowledged the reality of God in his life even if he was not ready yet himself to yield in that relationship. He could not bring himself to simply trust and obey, or to listen and love as Moses puts it in Deuteronomy. I see this wrestling with God as symbolic of Jacob’s struggle through life to embrace the faith of his parents and grandparents. He wants the blessing they have, but he does not want to walk with God like they do.

Blessed in Life Jacob Forgets His Promise

After that night of wrestling with God, Jacob sets out to meet Esau. And everything turns out fine. They hug. They weep. They agree to be friends. And Esau returns to Seir which is south of the Dead Sea, far enough not to be in conflict with Jacob settling in Canaan. Jacob then crosses the Jordan river and buys a piece of land next to the city Shechem. This puts Jacob in the middle of the promise land which seems like a good thing. But it’s not. What is the one promise Jacob had made to God? If you protect me and bless me then, “this stone, which I have set up as a pillar, will be God’s house; and of all that you give me I will surely give a tenth to you (Genesis 28:22).” Where was that stone? To what place had Jacob promised to return and build a temple to the Lord? Well, not Shechem. Bethel, he promised to return to Bethel.

This is what so often happens to those faith promises made when we humans are under duress. “Whatever you want from me God! Just save me from this mess, I have created, and I will do anything you want me to do!” God went along with it even though he knew what the result would be. Safe from Esau, Jacob re-evaluates the plan and rationalizes out that the piece of land by Shechem is just too good a deal to pass up. Certainly, God would not begrudge him that.

As a result, Jacob’s family suffers terribly. A prince of Shechem rapes Jacob’s daughter Dina. And in revenge Jacob’s second and third sons, Simeon and Levi, deceive the men of Shechem. The prince says he wants to marry Dina now. And Simeon and Levi, say, “Okay, as long as you are circumcised.” But after the ceremony of circumcision, when the men are decapacitated, Simeon and Levi murder them. It is an awful abuse of the covenant ritual, something like requiring someone to be baptized and then drowning them while they are under the water. Dina’s tragedy is now magnified with Jacob’s whole family being despised by people in the land.

Struggling in Life Jacob Remembers His Promise

“Then God said to Jacob, ‘Arise, go up to Bethel, and live there; and make an altar there to God, who appeared to you when you fled from your brother Esau (Genesis 35:1).’” God is telling Jacob, “Go and do what you originally promised to do.”

Jacob’s story is coming to an end. Other things will happen in his old age but that belongs more to Joseph and his sons than to Jacob. This is the end of Jacob’s story. Before moving to Bethel, he says this in Genesis 35:2-3,

² So Jacob said to his household and to all who were with him, “Put away the foreign gods which are among you, and purify yourselves and change your garments; ³ and let us arise and go up to Bethel, and I will make an altar there to God, who answered me in the day of my distress and has been with me wherever I have gone (Genesis 35:2–3).”

I think Jacob is done wrestling with God. He is done doing things his way. He is done making bargains. God says, “Arise and go.” So, Jacob arises and goes. First, he ordered the members of his household to clean out the gods among them. That’s not such a strange order as it might seem. Every family moves through life collecting idols. Jacob does not blame God now for what happened at Shechem. I think he is owning that for himself. He is now able to say of God, “[he] answered me in the day of my distress and has been with me wherever I have gone.” Like Isaac and like Abraham before him, Jacob is finally now ready to build an altar and worship his God.

Once Jacob arrives in Bethel, God appears and speaks to him again. This is Genesis 35:9-15,

¹⁰ God said to him, “Your name is Jacob; You shall no longer be called Jacob, But Israel shall be your name.” Thus He called him Israel. ¹¹ God also said to him, “I am God Almighty; Be fruitful and multiply; A nation and a company of nations shall come from you, And kings shall come forth from you. ¹² “The land which I gave to Abraham and Isaac, I will give it to you, And I will give the land to your descendants after you.” ¹³ Then God went up from him in the place where He had spoken with him. ¹⁴ Jacob set up a pillar in the place where He had spoken with him, a pillar of stone, and he poured out a drink offering on it; he also poured oil on it. ¹⁵ So Jacob named the place where God had spoken with him, Bethel.

This is the story of Jacob. It is a story we can relate to. In part it is true of us. In part it is true of people we love. It is the story of a long struggle with God. Jacob works to grab hold of what he wants in life. He is not content to wait for the Lord. He does not trust God. He does not want to walk in close relationship with God. He is fine operating like a junior business partner with God blessing him and him paying back God a tithe. That is enough of a relationship for Jacob. And yet, he cannot shake the knowledge of God instilled by his family. His very wrestling with God proves his belief in God. He wants blessing. He does not want to yield, until finally, after going his own way continues to bring tragedy and finally tragedy on his children, he breaks. And now he is ready to put away the idols, to submit himself, and finally go where God leads.

Even more than the story of Abraham, the story of Jacob raises the question, how can the promise of God be kept if it depends on the faithfulness of his people? It is the faithfulness of God that stands out in this story. He allows Jacob the freedom to enter into the struggle of life. And he never gives up on Jacob. Through it all, God is with him. God's faithfulness is the anchor to the promise, not man's.

And will the promise continue to hold? With every generation we must hand of the baton on. But what if they are not worthy of the promise? What if they do not want the promise? What happens then? We will continue with that question into the next story, the next generation, where the problem only intensifies.

Reflection Questions

1. As you look over Isaac's story consider especially the covenant renewal of chapter 26. What stands out to you? What do you notice as interesting or important or strange or confusing? What questions come to mind?
2. Consider also the prophecy made about Jacob in Genesis 25:23. Try to relate to Isaac. Why do you think it was so hard for him to see the covenant being renewed through Jacob instead of Esau? What personal factors and what cultural factors might have worked together to fix in Isaac's mind the continual favoring of Esau?
3. As you look over Jacob's story from Genesis 27 – 35 what moments especially stand out to you? What two or three passages seem to be especially significant or especially interesting to you?
4. Consider closely the story about Jacob wrestling with God in Genesis 32:24-32? What stands out to you in this passage?
5. How do these two things represent Jacob's life: Jacob grasping Esau's heel at birth and Jacob's wrestling with God?
6. Consider the promise of God and the promise of Jacob in 28:13-22. And then consider the promise of God renewed in 35:9-15. Do you believe the Jacob of Genesis 35 is different from the Jacob of Genesis 28? How so?

Lesson 7: Genesis 36-50 Joseph and Judah

Introduction

There are twelve sons. Neither Abraham nor Isaac were that fruitful. With Jacob we can begin to imagine descendants numerous as the stars in the sky and the sand on the seashore. There are twelve sons. But we have this problem. God has made a promise that the nations will be blessed through Abraham's descendants. Abraham could ask the question, "If the promise depends on me, how do I know that I will continue to be acceptable to you O Lord?" God's answer in Genesis 15, "Lay down over there Abraham. I will walk through the covenant animals. I will take the curse for your covenant unfaithfulness. I will die as a substitute for your sin so that you will always be acceptable to me, declared righteous not by your works but by faith."

Okay. Abraham had faith. He trusted God for his own righteousness. But the promise also depends on children like Esau who never seems to have trusted in the Lord at all and Jacob who showed a desire for the promised blessing but struggled through most of his life unable to yield to God. How is this promise going to work when it constantly relies on a new generation that first has to come to faith in God and then has to learn how to live for God? Involving this human family has placed the promise on pretty shaky ground. We have got to wonder how the twelve sons are going to turn out.

Genesis chapter 37 begins with these words, "Now Jacob lived in the land where his father had sojourned, in the land of Canaan. These are the records of the generations of Jacob." The genealogy statement "these are the generations of Jacob" indicates that we are moving on to the next generation. Rather than focus on all twelve sons, we get the story of one son, Joseph. His story gives us an example walk with God, while also communicating significant theological realities, about God, man, and the mission. I am going to spend most of this lesson doing an overview of the narrative. I love the narrative of Joseph. And I am going to conclude with some key theological highlights.

Joseph the Pesky Brother (37)

As we have already seen before, we see a sin pattern picked up from father by the son. Just as Isaac favored Esau, we are told in 37:3, "Now Israel loved Joseph more than all his sons, because he was the son of his old age; and he made him a varicolored tunic." Jacob, also called Israel ever since his wrestling match with God, gives preference to this one son. Not only was he the second youngest son, so the son of his old age, he was also the first-born of the beloved Rachel. Jacob is not helping Joseph out with his brothers here. Verse 2 tells us he is seventeen. And his role is to go see how his older brothers are doing with the flocks and then come back and report on them to Jacob. He is the spy. Verse 4 tells us, "they hated him and could not speak to him on friendly terms." The varied colored robe made matters worse. Christian interpreters have often thought the robe was a fancy reminder to the brothers of their father's favoritism. My Bible has a note beside the word varicolored, indicating that the Hebrew word could also be translated as long. It is a long robe. Scholars have noticed accounts in ancient literature where a long robe is an indication of inheritance. If that is the case, and I believe it is, the long robe of Joseph suggests to the brothers that this little spy is going to be the blessed as first-born. He is going to get the blessing.

And Joseph adds fuel to the fire. He has a dream. And he seems to go among his brothers excited and ready to share his dream without any consideration of how they will view it. And he tells them that twelve sheaves of wheat were bound in the field and all of them bowed down to my sheave. "Isn't that interesting!" Well, no, not to the brothers. They respond in 37:8, "Are you actually going to reign over us? Are you really going to rule over us?" And they hated him even more.

Then he does it again, but this time eleven stars, the sun, and the moon bow down to him. And Jacob gets stirred up this time. Verse 10 says, "And his father rebuked him and said to him, 'What is this dream that you have had? Shall I and your mother and your brothers actually come to bow ourselves down before you to the ground?' And his brothers were jealous of him..."

So, how do we take this young Joseph. We could go on the more negative side and interpret him as a manipulative brat who knew exactly what he was saying and the trouble it would cause. I think there is something of the brat here, but I would not go that far. I do not really see him as manipulative. I see Joseph as a prideful teenage boy who does not give much thought to the feelings of others. He has been the baby. He is used to the attention. He assumes they love him and favor him as his father does. He is the center of his father's world and likely the center of his own world. He might be a good kid. But there is some kind of self-centered naivete in him that expected his brothers and father and step-mother to be excited about his dreams. He does not seem to get the animosity that surrounds him. He certainly shows no fear when sent out as usual to check up on his brothers. He goes again.

And this time, when they see him coming, they grumble, "Here comes that dreamer." They already suspected the long robe meant inheritance. The dreams just put it all out there in front of everybody. Now, they plot to kill him. Reuben, the true first-born, argues for his life and even plans on rescuing him. The first thing they do when they grab Joseph is to strip him of that robe. We are going to notice the recurring theme of the robe or the garment. And stripping it away is taking away the status that Jacob may have conferred. They are removing his inheritance. They are removing the blessing from him. Then they throw him in a pit. And while Reuben is gone, they sell him to slavers on the way to Egypt.

Then they go and lie to their father. Ironically, Jacob the father had also lied to his father to steal the blessing. These sons are lying to their father. And they even use the robe of inheritance as bloody proof. It is this robe that had stoked up bitterness in the brothers. They hold it out, "See this bloody robe." It subconsciously implies, "You are the cause of his death, you put him out there," which of course is not true. Jacob bears fault, but the sons are the ones who acted on their own hatred. Someone might even blame God. He gave the dreams to Joseph. But God did not tell Joseph to go lord it over his brothers and brag about it. Joseph is responsible for his behavior. And the brothers are responsible for their behavior.

Judah in Contrast to Joseph (38)

Before we get to Egypt where the slavers are taking Joseph, we first encounter an unpleasant story about Judah popping up in chapter 38. It puts a screeching halt on our narrative. We are wondering what is going to happen to Joseph? And then we get this weird chapter about Judah's wicked sons and a daughter-in-law acting like a prostitute. Why is this here? That's a great question. It is exactly the question Moses expects you to be asking. The authors of Scripture like to overlap their narratives, and when you see something that pops up in here that does not look like it belongs, you are supposed to pay attention. This story is not here by mistake. It is not poor narrative style. At the very least it creates dramatic pause, enhancing our desire to hear what is happening with Joseph. But there is more to it than that.

Judah had three sons. The first married Tamar. He was wicked, so God took his life. Here is what should happen in that culture. As a childless widow Tamar is left in a very precarious situation. There are very few options for survival. Her husband's brother is expected to step up and take her as a wife. Her first-born son, however, will take on the name and inheritance of her dead husband who was the first-born of Judah.

Inheritance worked this way. The first born gets a double portion to carry on the family name and take care of mother and unmarried sisters. In the case of three sons, the inheritance would be split into four parts. The first-born would take two-fourths and then each other brother one-fourth. That means, if this second born brother does his duty, Tamar's first-born son will get two-fourths of the inheritance while he stays with his one-fourth. If Tamar has no children, then there are only two sons in the running. He would be first-born, so he would get the double portion of two-thirds and the final younger brother would get one-third. That's the decision before this brother who has Tamar. Get Tamar pregnant and take only one-fourth of the inheritance or make sure she does not get pregnant and take two-thirds of the inheritance. He goes for two-thirds, and God strikes him dead.

Judah is scared to give his third son to Tamar. And we should note that she has been upright throughout. The problem is with Judah's sons. Refused the third son, Tamar takes up one of the role's available to women in her situation. It's not the role you want. It's the role of the prostitute. But she has in mind only one man. She tricks Judah into sleeping with her, managing at the same time to get from him his seal and his staff. And later when he becomes enraged at hearing that his daughter-in-law is pregnant, she presents these items to him. This is the man who got me pregnant. Now we are going to see something of Judah's character. It is his seal and his staff. He is the man. First, we saw a lack of moral courage when he tried to protect his son at the expense of shaming Tamar and leaving her with no children. But then, when he is shamed by her for withholding her right to have a child, he accepts the rebuke, admitting in 38:29, "She is more righteous than I, inasmuch as I did not give her to my son." He follows that through with action, recognizing her twin sons as his own. Because he finally did what was right, Tamar's sons will bear the name of Judah, and the one named Perez will have a later descendant named David and a much later descendant named Jesus. The story of Joseph has much to do with the story of inheritance. And the story of Judah stays on theme. It also provides us with a character study for comparison. In that sense, the story of Judah serves as a foil, that is a literary example to help us better understand our main character. When we get back to Joseph, we will see his character in contrast to the character of Judah and Judah's sons.

Joseph the Faithful Slave (39)

So, back to Joseph. Sold to Potiphar captain of the bodyguard, we find out in 39:3, "His master saw that Yahweh was with him and Yahweh caused all that he did to prosper in his hand." Another thing biblical authors like to do is to repeat key words in the story, such as the key word robe or hand. Potiphar saw everything prosper in Joseph's hand, so verse 6 tells us that he left everything in Joseph's hand.

We are also told, almost as an irrelevant side note that Joseph is "handsome in form and appearance." But that is not a side note is it? That is motive. The motive of Potiphar's wife. So we see her making sexual advances towards handsome Joseph. And here is how his character matches up with Judah's. In 39:9 he rebuffs her saying, "There is no one greater in this house than I, and [Potiphar] has withheld nothing from me except you, because you are his wife. How then could I do this great evil, and sin against God?" Prior to the Mosaic law being given, we have not had the ten commandments yet, Joseph understood something about the moral character of Yahweh. He understood adultery as a great evil. And so, he did what so many men fail to do. He ran. You want a moral principle from Joseph. There is a great one. Run. One of the guys I was in Bible study with at N.C. State made a conscious decision to walk by the gym at night on his way to Bible study because the gym had big windows in the aerobic section. So, he would test the purity of his mind by walking alongside this long row of college women doing aerobics. That's an awful idea. And he was frustrated at his failure to not think sexual thoughts. Joseph has the solution. "Don't go by the gym. Take a different route. Leave. Escape." Or as Monty Python put it, "Run away, run away."

In the story about Tamar it is the woman who is wronged. In the story about Joseph it is going to be the man. Both things happen in our world. In this case, Potiphar's wife is angry at Joseph's rebuff and so she makes false accusations. Verse 13 tells us, "When she saw that he had left his garment in her hand, and had fled outside, she called to the men of her household and said to them, 'See, he has brought in a Hebrew to us to make sport of us; he came in to me to lie with me, and I screamed...and he left his garment beside me and fled...'" In the earlier chapter, Joseph's garment is connected to the lie about his death. It is placed before his father. Here his garment is connected to the lie about sexual violence. There is irony here. Because of his true character, Potiphar put everything into Joseph's hand, except his wife. Now his wife stands with Joseph's garment in her hand, accusing him of false character.

We then read that Potiphar's anger burned when he heard the story, presumably it burned against Joseph. But instead of having Joseph killed, he throws him in prison. I do not know whether to take

this as indication that Potiphar's burning anger was somewhat against his wife as he recognized Joseph was not to blame or if God simply protecting Joseph, having him thrown into prison instead of being executed.

Joseph the Forgotten Prisoner (40)

Either way, Joseph does what is right and ends up in prison for it. That is a truth we must accept. Good moral character can lead to others recognizing and affirming our behavior, as Potiphar recognized and promoted Joseph. But doing what is right is not a guarantee of success or affirmation. As with Potiphar's wife, the result of moral fortitude might land you in prison. We know the end of the story. We already know that God's sovereign hand is guiding Joseph's life. Others mean to do him harm and yet, God is using evil to bring about good. We know that. Still, a person can choose to resist or choose to participate in the plan that God is working out. Jacob chose to resist. He wrestled with God. Suffering came on him not only from outside agents but also as a result of his own behavior. It took a lot of pain to turn him around. What about Joseph? We could say that his naïve teenage pride contributed to the actions of his brothers. Theirs was the blame, but Joseph contributed. Not so here. Joseph did everything right. He found himself a slave in the house of an Egyptian master, yet he did not give in. He accepted his situation and worked as though working for the Lord. And when faced with significant temptation, he did not choose the way of the culture around him. He stood firm, both in faithfulness to Potiphar and more importantly in faithfulness to Yahweh. Now in prison, who could blame him for feeling let down by both? Neither his Egyptian master nor his Lord God chose to save him from false imprisonment. They allowed it.

What now of Joseph's character? What will he do? It is easy to imagine Joseph lost in bitterness or depression or bewilderment. His world has been rocked again, from favored son to slavery, from respected manager to prison. You don't have to curse God, but why make an effort? Just keep your head down and wait for God to do whatever he chooses to do. You are stuck. Give up. That is not what we see Joseph doing. We do not know how long it took for him to get through the shock and disillusionment of his new reality, but he did get through it. He chose to believe in God and be faithful in his present circumstances, obedient as though obedient to the Lord. We have no idea how this story would turn out if Joseph did not act. If he just sulked in his cell. Certainly, God would have continued on as he did with Jacob, getting Jacob to Bethel. But Joseph did act, and as a result, he got to play the role of a positive participant in God's plan.

Joseph's decision to get up and do got him recognized again. This time by the chief jailor. And again, we are told twice in 39:22 and 23 that the man in charge, "committed into Joseph's hand all the prisoners who were in the jail, so that whatever was done there, he was responsible for it." How does Joseph meet the baker and cup bearer if he did not commit himself to positive action, if he just stayed in his cell? We do not know. But he got up. And that made a difference.

Joseph the Wise Counselor (41)

You know the story. Joseph receives a dream regarding each official. One is executed as foretold and the other released as foretold. This is not Joseph's first experience with dreams. Though he handles this one better. Still, his hopes do not pan out. After the dream comes true, we are told in verse 40:23, "Yet the chief cup bearer did not remember Joseph but forgot him." Which to Joseph must have felt like God forgot him. The first verse in the next chapter tells it us it was two years before anybody thought about Joseph again. Are you ready to wait that long? Maybe you have. Maybe you know what long wait though painful circumstances is like. For many of us, we struggle to wait on God to work it out in a few weeks, and then we are ready to quit, much less a couple of years. You sense God is doing something to lift you out of your imprisonment, or your pit, or your hard circumstances. You sense God doing something supernatural. And you are right. He does something spectacular. It could only be from God. But the next day after that, nothing happens. And the next day, nothing happens. Eventually, your emotional state of hope and joy, raised so high by God's work and your expectant release, falls past neutral into disillusionment much deeper than the initial shock of your

fall into the pit in the first place. Your false hope crashes down. For two years Joseph is forgotten. He must have lost all hope in the cup bearer as a source of rescue.

And now, with all hope gone, we are told Pharaoh had a dream. And we smile. Because we know what is coming. We know that Joseph knows about dreams. The dreams are about seven years of plenty and seven years of drought, not only in Egypt, but throughout the Ancient Near East. We are now going to see the character of Joseph shine. He has come a long way from being the spoiled favored son. He has lived life as obedience to the Lord. He has risen up. And he has fallen down. And he has kept going in faith, holding on to his non-Egyptian God and his morals. God gave him a gift for interpreting dreams that he did not initially know how to use rightly. In fact, he initially abused it, bragging to his brothers. But he has grown. And now when asked by Pharaoh to interpret the dream, he responds in 41:16, "It is not in me; God will give Pharaoh a favorable answer."

God has been developing Joseph, in his moral character, in his professional abilities, and in the ways of God. These things all come together as Joseph, the believing manager of households and of prisons, interprets Pharaoh's dream, even taking the audacious step of suggesting a course of action, not something a slave prisoner ought to do in the presence of a god-king of a super power. I do not know if Joseph was fully in the moment, giving out the word of God, and he is not even thinking about how his hearer might hear him. That is how he was with his brothers. I like to think he was much more aware of who he was and who he was talking to at this point in his life. I imagine that he saw the line between 41:32 where he was interpreting the dream and 41:33 where he proposed to Pharaoh what to do. I like to think in a quick moment, he saw that line, and he heard from God, and he recognized that this is what God had prepared me for, and then he stepped across that line intentionally in faith. And he took the risk. And he boldly proposed to Pharaoh. And he began his proposal this way, "Now let Pharaoh look for a man discerning and wise, and set him over the land of Egypt. Let Pharaoh take action..." He is telling Pharaoh to take action. He continues on recommending how to store food in the years of plenty to prepare for the years of drought. He is giving a seven-year plan to the ruler of Egypt, of Egypt, a superpower! That's like giving the leader of the US or Russia or Germany or China instruction on internal policy that must be acted on for seven consistent years before anybody knows whether it is a good policy.

But the interpretation of the dream and the insight behind the proposal convinced Pharaoh. Not only did he accept Joseph's recommendation, instead of killing him or throwing him back into prison, but he made the best leadership move of his life, saying in 41:39, "Since God has informed you of all this, there is no one so discerning and wise as you are...see I have set you over the land of Egypt." Leaders love it, if you are going to tell them there is a problem, then give them a practical solution to fix that problem. And so, Joseph becomes one of those rare examples for us in Scripture of a leader who consistently through his life, truly models godly character. He is called discerning and wise and this wisdom comes from trusting God, listening to his voice, and growing through the failures. That's not only in contrast to the character of Judah. That is in contrast to Abraham, who went to Egypt and brought plague on it when he lied to Pharaoh about Sarah. Joseph is going to be a true son of the promise. He brings blessing to Egypt, and not only to Egypt but to the nations. It is a mini-fulfillment of the promise, foreshadowing the greater fulfillment to come. That the descendant of Abraham will bless all peoples.

We are told in 41:46 that Joseph is now 30 years old. God has used the past 13 years in Egypt to prepare him for what must come next. And though it is a monumental task, the organization of Egypt's produce only sets the context for the next crucial point in Joseph's life, and in the history of the covenant of promise. We have to get Joseph's family to Egypt and to do that we need Joseph to forgive the brothers who wanted to kill him and just settled for making him a slave. That's the next great task in front of Joseph. He is just not aware yet that it is coming.

Joseph the Compassionate Brother (42-45)

We are approaching the climax in chapters 42-44. There is a lot of detail here worth getting into. I will only consider the overview with just a few details. Joseph marries a woman whose father is a priest. They have two sons. Manasseh means, "God has made me forget." Ephraim means "fruitfulness" because as Joseph says in 41:52, "God has made me fruitful in the land of my affliction." This sounds to me like a man who gives credit to God for all he has, and yet, has also decided to let go of what was. Egypt is his new home. He has let go of his former family and started a new Egyptian family. His roots are here now. He has moved on.

But God does not allow him to forget his brothers. He must face them. You know the story. The brothers hear there is food in Egypt. They come to buy some. In 42:9 we are told that Joseph remembered the dreams he had about his brothers. That implies he had set aside those dreams, but then they come back to him in a rush. He does not seem to know what he wants to do with his brothers. Do I ignore them? Do I kill them? Do I trust them? Do I embrace them? What would you do, the brothers who sold you into slavery?

Joseph accuses them of being spies, presumably to get a response. So, they tell a bit of their story but of course cover up a crucial point. Verse 13, "Your servants are twelve brothers in all, the sons of one man in the land of Canaan; and behold, the youngest is with our father today, and one is no more." The one who is no more, of course, is Joseph. The youngest is Benjamin, Joseph's only true brother. It seems at this moment, not knowing what to do with these brothers, Joseph longs for family, for his brother Benjamin. So, he imprisons them as spies, perhaps to let them taste what he experienced, perhaps to give him time to decide what to do. Then he tells them that all but one can go. That one will be a hostage until they bring Benjamin as proof that they have been telling the truth. Really, he just wants to see Benjamin. They believe God is punishing them for what they did to Joseph, and they start talking about it not realizing that Joseph understands them because he had been using an interpreter. Joseph is overcome, and he weeps but not where they can see him. Still, he keeps Simeon, while sending the brothers off with the money returned in their bags and the command not to come back without Benjamin.

The weeping and the return of the money shows us that Joseph has strong feelings about his brothers. And we can imagine those feelings being greatly mixed. He does not trust them. He does not reveal himself. I am not sure he knows what he wants to do at this point.

The famine continues. And Jacob realizes he must allow the brothers to return with Benjamin. The brothers return. The text says that they bring money in their hand and presents in their hand. It is the word hand again. Joseph is eager to see his brother Benjamin, but on seeing him he must swiftly leave the room, being overcome emotionally. After composing himself, he comes back out for the meal. Then he sends them off again putting their money back, but also putting his personal cup in Benjamin's sack. The brothers are brought back and accused of stealing. The cup was found on Benjamin and so, we learn Joseph's goal. Verse 44:17 reads, "The man in whose hand the cup has been found, he shall be my slave; but as for you, go up in peace to your father."

It seems Joseph had forgiven his brothers. "Go in peace." But it is one thing to forgive your family and a very different thing to invite them to come live with you. And Joseph is not ready for reconciliation to that extent. He wishes them peace, and he sends them off but without Benjamin. He had devised this plan to keep Benjamin without revealing himself to them. Then Judah steps up with a plea. This is Genesis 44:18-34.

¹⁸ Then Judah approached him, and said, "Oh my lord, may your servant please speak a word in my lord's ears, and do not be angry with your servant; for you are equal to Pharaoh. ¹⁹ "My lord asked his servants, saying, 'Have you a father or a brother?' ²⁰ "We said to my lord, 'We have an old father and a little child of his old age. Now his brother is dead, so he alone is left of his mother, and his father loves him.' ²¹ "Then you said to your servants, 'Bring him down to me that I may set my eyes on him.' ²² "But we said to my lord, 'The lad cannot leave his father,

for if he should leave his father, his father would die.’²³ “You said to your servants, however, ‘Unless your youngest brother comes down with you, you will not see my face again.’²⁴ “Thus it came about when we went up to your servant my father, we told him the words of my lord.²⁵ “Our father said, ‘Go back, buy us a little food.’²⁶ “But we said, ‘We cannot go down. If our youngest brother is with us, then we will go down; for we cannot see the man’s face unless our youngest brother is with us.’²⁷ “Your servant my father said to us, ‘You know that my wife bore me two sons;²⁸ and the one went out from me, and I said, “Surely he is torn in pieces,” and I have not seen him since.’²⁹ ‘If you take this one also from me, and harm befalls him, you will bring my gray hair down to Sheol in sorrow.’³⁰ “Now, therefore, when I come to your servant my father, and the lad is not with us, since his life is bound up in the lad’s life,³¹ when he sees that the lad is not *with us*, he will die. Thus your servants will bring the gray hair of your servant our father down to Sheol in sorrow.³² “For your servant became surety for the lad to my father, saying, ‘If I do not bring him *back* to you, then let me bear the blame before my father forever.’³³ “Now, therefore, please let your servant remain instead of the lad a slave to my lord, and let the lad go up with his brothers.³⁴ “For how shall I go up to my father if the lad is not with me—for fear that I see the evil that would overtake my father?”

We see a serious change in Judah’s character. He sinned against Tamar but repented. Now he steps up. He did not step up to speak for Joseph when the brothers sold Joseph off. He does step up now to speak for Benjamin, for the sake of his father, and to offer himself as a substitute. In doing so, Judah steps right into God’s plan. His plea breaks down the last barrier in Joseph’s heart and paves the way for the family of Israel to move to Egypt. This is the very next paragraph in 45:1-9.

¹ Then Joseph could not control himself before all those who stood by him, and he cried, “Have everyone go out from me.” So there was no man with him when Joseph made himself known to his brothers. ² He wept so loudly that the Egyptians heard *it*, and the household of Pharaoh heard *of it*. ³ Then Joseph said to his brothers, “I am Joseph! Is my father still alive?” But his brothers could not answer him, for they were dismayed at his presence. ⁴ Then Joseph said to his brothers, “Please come closer to me.” And they came closer. And he said, “I am your brother Joseph, whom you sold into Egypt.” ⁵ “Now do not be grieved or angry with yourselves, because you sold me here, for God sent me before you to preserve life. ⁶ “For the famine *has been* in the land these two years, and there are still five years in which there will be neither plowing nor harvesting. ⁷ “God sent me before you to preserve for you a remnant in the earth, and to keep you alive by a great deliverance. ⁸ “Now, therefore, it was not you who sent me here, but God; and He has made me a father to Pharaoh and lord of all his household and ruler over all the land of Egypt. ⁹ “Hurry and go up to my father, and say to him, ‘Thus says your son Joseph, “God has made me lord of all Egypt; come down to me, do not delay. ¹⁰ “You shall live in the land of Goshen, and you shall be near me, you and your children and your children’s children and your flocks and your herds and all that you have.

The sons return to Canaan to gather their father, wives, children, herds and possessions. Then they return to Egypt, protected and provided for by their younger brother Joseph. The dream of his youth had come true in the most spectacular of ways. But the brothers have not forgotten what they had done. And even with all the blessing from Joseph, they still wondered where they stand with him. When Jacob dies, they are fearful that Joseph will turn against them. They go to him to ask forgiveness. And Joseph weeps. And he speaks to them, as recorded in the last chapter of Genesis 50:19-21,

“Do not be afraid, for am I in God’s place? And as for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good in order to bring about this present result to preserve many people alive. So therefore, do not be afraid; I will provide for you and your little ones.’ So, he comforted them and spoke to their heart.”

How will God ensure the promise? Will it be ensured by men of character like Joseph? In the end, no. That will be the whole story of the Old Testament. There are a few men like Joseph, you know Daniel,

who stand out in character and wisdom, but on the whole that cannot be the lesson here. Those men are extremely rare. The best of men do really bad things. We do see in Joseph the blessing of stepping into God's plan. We can contribute. That's a lesson we are supposed to get from this. We can make a difference. Our actions matter. But our actions do not change the sovereign plan of God. Even when we fail utterly, God ensures his own promise. As Joseph taught his brothers, "What you meant for evil, God meant for good." The Bible holds these two truths together. First, human beings are responsible for their moral actions. We see this in the lives of men like Abraham and Jacob and Joseph. Second, God's absolute sovereignty is never in question. He is the primary actor in every story. And he will bring it to completion in the way he chooses. That is true in the bigger story of salvation-history and that is true in your story. If you have believed in Jesus, your actions matter. Your sin brings consequence. Your faithfulness brings blessing. But it is not yours to change the final outcome. After calling us to present ourselves to God as instruments of righteousness in Romans chapter 6, to step up and do, Paul then assures us that though we participate with God in our sanctification in this life, our initial justification and our final glorification rest fully, 100%, completely in God's hand. And this is how Paul put it in Romans 8:28-30,

²⁸ And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose. ²⁹ For those whom He foreknew, He also predestined to become conformed to the image of His Son, so that He would be the firstborn among many brethren; ³⁰ and these whom He predestined, He also called; and these whom He called, He also justified; and these whom He justified, He also glorified."

That sums up pretty well Joseph's story. God calls us to be fully engaged. And there is blessing when we trust the Lord and obey him in our circumstances. And in the end, we do not have to fear. It is God who glorifies. He gets us home. We do not have to fear our own pride, betrayal by brothers, slavery, false accusation, prison, being brought before the mighty of the earth. God takes what is meant for evil and uses it to bring about good. God is in charge of the story. And if he says he has got you, he has got you. The promise is safe with God.

Prologue: The First-Born

I do have one last point to make. This point helps to interpret a number of passages in the Bible and also underscores how very much God is in control. This has been the story of Joseph, but you may have noticed it seems also to be the story of Judah. Jacob had twelve sons. Reuben, the first was disqualified as first-born for sleeping with his father's concubine. Simeon and Levi, the second and third were disqualified for using the ritual of circumcision to overcome and murder the men of Shechem. Judah the fourth might then claim the right to the blessing of first-born. And yet, Jacob gives that right to Joseph. In Genesis 48, Jacob says that Joseph's sons will take equal places with their uncles. Remember the first-born is given a double portion of inheritance. So, with twelve portions, you divide everything up into thirteen parts, giving the first-born two parts. By elevating Manasseh and Ephraim to the level of their uncles, Joseph gets two parts, the blessing of the first-born. This is why we have no tribe of Joseph in the rest of the Old Testament. Instead we have the two tribes, Manasseh and Ephraim.

Though there is a little twist. Jacob crosses his arms placing the right hand on the younger Ephraim, designating Ephraim as Joseph's first-born. Which is very much in line with God's practice of not following too closely human custom. This is why the name Ephraim is often used in the prophets to designate the future northern kingdom of Israel, the kingdom that breaks off from Judah. And when that kingdom broke off at first from Judah it was led by Jeroboam of this tribe of Ephraim. He had the greatest claim being from the first-born of Joseph, and Joseph himself being the first-born of Jacob. The blessing of Joseph in Genesis 49:26 affirms his status, "May the blessings of your father be on the head of Joseph, and on the crown of the head of the one distinguished among his brothers."

And yet, Judah's claim as first-born is even more strongly affirmed in this blessing section. This is odd, since Joseph clearly gets the double inheritance from Jacob. But this is the prophecy from God about

Judah, 49:10 reads, “The scepter shall not depart from Judah, nor the ruler’s staff from between his feet.” God’s plan is that the scepter will not depart from Judah. He will say the same thing almost one thousand years later to David, son of Jesse. In the final plea that broke Joseph’s heart, I can’t help but notice that it was Judah who stepped forward to offer himself up as a substitute. God is in charge of the plan. His promise cannot fail.

Reflection Questions

1. God promised to provide for and protect Abraham and his descendants. Think back over Genesis 12-50 and record a couple of examples for each generation where God provided for and where God protected the members of this family.
2. What do you take away from the story of Judah in chapter 38? What stands out to you? Why do you think Moses wrote this into the story of Joseph at this point?
3. Look for the key word hand in chapter 39. Why do you think that Moses kept emphasizing these words in the narrative? What larger themes in Genesis might the words hand and robe/garment direct our attention to?
4. What stands out to you in the development of Joseph from when you are first introduced to him as a 17-year old in chapter 37 through the 13 years as a slave in Potiphar’s house and in prison in chapters 39 and 40 to his appointment as the manager of Egypt, as a husband and father in chapter 41. What characteristics or skills does Joseph pick up? How does God develop Joseph? How is Joseph described? Considering these questions what stands out to you?
5. What stands out to you regarding Joseph’s interaction with his brothers. Do you think he knows what he wants to do from the start, or do you think he is unsure? What strikes you as important or interesting?
6. How have you seen the principle of Genesis 50:19-20 in your own life story?

Lesson 8: Ancient Near East Literary Background to the Books of Moses

Introduction

This is going to be a different kind of lesson. I am pausing our interpretation of the books of Moses to address some questions about the historicity of the Pentateuch and the contribution of Ancient Near Eastern literature to our understanding of the biblical text. If you would rather stay in the biblical study of the Pentateuch, feel free to skip ahead to lesson 9 where we began our look at the book of Exodus. You will not miss any significant aspect of the story if you do skip ahead. If you would like to get some more background information on types of literature in the Ancient Near East and how that literature helps us read our Bible, then stay with me for this lesson.

I've been listening to the *Hardcore History* podcast by Dan Carlin. He is great at reading a wide range of historians on a given topic and then bringing it all together with enthusiasm and insight. His series that I have just started is *King of kings*. It is about Cyrus the Great of Persia. Carlin tells the story of Thermopylae and the 300 Spartan warriors who stood up to the entire Persian army. What interests me is how Carlin uses his references. For most of the story he relies on Greek historian Herodotus who was a toddler when the battle took place, so though not a contemporary, he was quite close. Carlin tells how the 300 Spartans arranged themselves across the narrow pass of Thermopylae against the 1 million strong Persian army in this very cinematic kind of "You shall not pass" moment. And then Carlin adds in a quote taken from Plutarch. It's a great line. He calls it a Clint Eastwood quote. The Persians tell the Spartans that if they lay down their weapons and shields then they are all free to go. Nothing will happen to them. To which the Spartans respond, "Come and get them."

A little later in the podcast, Carlin gives a biblical view of the Persians by quoting the sack of Babylon that happens after the feast of Belshazzar. It's the handwriting on the wall passage from Daniel 5. Carlin loves the passage, especially what the hand wrote, "Mene, mene, tekel, upharsin," which means, numbered, numbered, weighed, divided. Carlin reads what Daniel tells Belshazzar, "Mene - God has numbered your kingdom and put an end to it. Tekel - you have been weighed on the scales and found deficient. Upharsin - your kingdom has been divided and given over to the Medes and Persians (Daniel 5:26-28)."

Then Carline makes this comment, "None of that is true but that's how the Bible story goes (*Hardcore History King of kings* podcast, 28:55)." Wait a minute. In the story about the three hundred you used a quote from Plutarch to put words in the mouths of the Spartans, regarding their weapons, "Come and get them." Well, Plutarch was a teenager during the Apostle Paul's missionary journeys. That's 500 years after the battle at Thermopylae. And you present Plutarch's quote as part of the story, without commenting on its truthfulness. Then when you come to tell a story in the Bible, you make the comment that we know it never happened. And you say it in an off-hand way as though all your listeners are going to agree, "Of course, it is in the Bible. We know it is not true. It is a bit of interesting anti-babylonian PR." But then I am left asking, "How do we know it never happened?" That's my first question. My second question is, "Why did Dan Carlin feel the need to make sure we knew he was not actually suggesting the biblical account is true?" I doubt he believes that Plutarch's "Come and take them" quote actually happened. What stands out to me is that he found no need to clarify about the truthfulness or lack of truthfulness of his Greek sources, and yet did feel this need to distance himself from the biblical account.

What is going on there? I believe Dan Carlin is giving us a typical example of scholarly pressure to devalue the historicity of the Bible. Why does he do that? Is there solid evidence that the biblical story is fictitious? Carlin does not claim to be a historian or biblical scholar. He is recommunicating an attitude that is likely present in the scholars he is reading. And like Carlin, we could go to these scholars and get a lot of good historical information. We just need to be asking, "What are their presuppositions? What leads them to this prejudice against the Bible as a historical source, especially when they are ready to accept so many other less well-attested documents?"

This is a question I want to address. Christians should have no fear at all over the finds of archaeology and all the interesting parallels or similarities we see in the Bible and in the ancient world. I love reading ancient flood myths, and the creation stories, and law codes, and covenant examples that come outside of the Bible. Ancient history is not a threat to the Bible or to a Christian's walk with God. The interpretations of that history, however, can be a threat to the Christian worldview, especially when we take scholarly assertions as fact without recognizing the presuppositions that lead to those claims and interpretations about the history. "Why do we know that the biblical story of Belshazzar never happened? Why do we know that Moses did not write the Pentateuch? Why do we know that Abraham is just a myth like King Arthur? What is the basis for such assertions?" I do not think we know those things at all. We have good reason for believing in the historicity of Moses and Abraham and Belshazzar.

What's our goal for this lesson? I am not out to try to prove that the Bible is God's word or prove the historicity of all the biblical stories. I do not think that is possible for any historical document. We can show proofs that support the rationality of believing in the historicity of the Bible, but we cannot absolutely prove that what we have is the accurate interpretation of a historical event. In the end I have to come to a decision myself. And to be forthright, I have come to a fixed conviction. I have as a basic presupposition this belief that the Bible is the word of God, and the Bible is true on all events about which it speaks. It is true and truthful, factual, correct when it speaks about historical events. I am not out to prove that right now. I am just telling you what my presupposition is. It is a belief supported by a number of factors, but ultimately resting on faith. We have to start somewhere as a foundation of knowledge, whether it is our self, whether it is other scholars whether it is something revealed from God. I start with these two truths (1) God exists and (2) the Bible is his word. So then, if proof of the Bible is not the goal, what is the goal?

1. The Apologetic goal

I have two goals in mind. My first goal is to address some of the scholarly presuppositions, so that we grow in our discernment of reading scholarly discoveries and benefit from the good without swallowing the whole interpretation that might be given. For example, scholars agree that there are many ancient flood stories, several in the ancient near east and others throughout the world. That is agreed on. Nobody really disputes that. How to understand the origins of those stories is not agreed on, though some scholars will present their interpretation as though it is fact. They will tell you how the stories all came to be. But that is a theory coming out of their own presuppositions. The goal is to grow in our ability to learn from history without uncritically accepting an interpretation about the historical findings.

2. The Interpretive goal

My second goal is to help you grow as an interpreter of Scripture by better understanding the literature and culture in the Bible. In fact, this is where the more important benefit lies. Critics of the Bible raise some very good questions. And these challenges force us to consider more carefully what we have in the Bible. The study of ancient near eastern literature and culture has provided us with good answers to skeptical questions. But answering the critic is not the primary benefit. The primary benefit is that in the end, thanks to the critic, we understand the Bible better. They required us to do some hard work and careful thinking. They are keeping us accountable to our claims about the Bible. That's a healthy thing.

So, as we spend a little time now answering some questions, I hope you will be strengthened in your ability to defend the historicity of the Bible. Even more, I hope you will have better insight into how to read and interpret the Bible yourself. You may not care much about the questions, but I can assure you, the answers turn out to be pretty helpful for future study.

What is the Documentary Hypothesis?

Now, we are going to have to limit our discussion somehow, because the historicity of the Bible is a huge topic. I am going to focus in on the documentary hypothesis because this is a primary view

about the books of Moses for non-evangelical Bible scholars and because it is something you will likely come into contact with whether you know it or not.

Scholars do not agree on the details of the hypothesis. There are a lot of versions out there. Here is the basic idea. We start with some very good observations, like, “If Moses wrote the Pentateuch, where did he get his source material from for all of Genesis, the creation, the flood, Abraham, and so on? Moses was not there. How does he know that stuff? And who wrote the end of Deuteronomy about his death? He did not write about that did he? So, who wrote it?” These are good, basic source questions which grew into full-blown skepticism.

In 1878, in his *History of Israel*, the German scholar Julius Wellhausen promoted the view that the Pentateuch and the book of Joshua were put together by a later editor who worked from four different sources. Maybe you have heard about this. It is the JEDP idea, the J or yahweist source, the E or elohist source, the P or priestly source, and the D or Deuteronomic source. So today, if you read a moderate or liberal commentary on the Pentateuch, the author will spend a good bit of time arguing which parts of a particular passage come from JEP or D. The J source uses the name Yahweh and provides a more primitive view of God. The E source uses the name Elohim and is generally associated with the Northern kingdom of Israel. The P source focuses on temple ceremony. It is the priestly source. It desires to centralize power in Jerusalem. And the D source focuses on one God who has made covenant with one people.

After Wellhausen, the German Scholar Martin Noth, working in the second half of the 20th century, is generally credited with the refinement of the Documentary hypothesis that is broadly accepted. He argued that the first four books of the Pentateuch were written by J and E and then edited by P, the priestly source. And then the D source wrote Deuteronomy. All of this is said to have been written well after king David, so not anywhere near Moses in the 1400s BC. J is said to be the earliest around 850 BC and the D the latest around 621 BC. The date of D is more precise because it is argued that the King of Judah Josiah did not actually find the book of the law in his reforms of the temple, but that under his reforms the book of Deuteronomy was written. It is a going back and rewriting history.

To get into the theory much further would take a lot amount of time, especially considering the significant amount of disagreement among scholars on how to decide who wrote what. So, with any given passage, you have lots of different people arguing how to divide it out between JED and P. We could ask, “Why believe in this theory anyway?” The disagreement among documentary hypothesis scholars on the vast majority of detail, suggests that the hypothesis is not really that helpful. It does not get us to an end result or into further understanding. A number of scholars, and I think Robert Alter, the Jewish author that I have quoted, would fit this category. They would reject the usefulness of trying to trace back the sources. Instead, they have decided to focus on the literature we do have, rather than an imaginary theory on how that literature came to be. The more this newer group of biblical scholars study the Pentateuch, the more they affirm that we have got a unified work of literature that bears the stamp of one author. So, not all non-evangelical scholars are going to agree with the documentary hypothesis or even with its usefulness. There are other scholars out there who will argue for the unity of authorship for various parts of the Bible. But still the documentary hypothesis is widely commented on or it provides presuppositions that still exist. So, let’s consider three of the assumptions made by documentary hypothesis scholars about the literature of the Pentateuch and then see where our answers to those assumptions will lead us.

Assessing the Documentary Hypothesis Assumptions Using Ancient Near Eastern Literature

The first assumption is one that you may have heard of before. This is it.

1st Assumption: *The Hebrews were an oral society whose tradition was later gathered and written down.* The idea here is that the text of the Pentateuch came down over hundreds of years as oral tradition. And that tradition contained various versions of similar stories that were available for a later editor to put together in order to form the biblical text.

That some of the early sources of Genesis came down as oral tradition may be true. We don't know. We have notices by the ten toledoth or generations references used to structure Genesis that Moses may have had ancient, written genealogical records at his disposal for some of what he wrote. Details of the other narratives, about Adam and Noah and Abraham and Isaac and Joseph, might have come down in written form or might have come down in oral form. We do not know that. So, the idea about oral transmission of sources prior to Moses might be a true theory. But to suggest that the Hebrews at the time of Moses must have passed down their traditions orally is to reject the cultural milieu in which the Bible says Moses lived. Let me explain that. In other words, major peoples all around Israel were writing things down during the time period of Moses, so why would we assume that Israel was not?

Since we are told Moses grew up in the royal house of Egypt, let's consider Egypt first. If we suppose the history of Moses is true, then what kind of exposure would Moses have had to written texts. Well, Egypt was writing long before Moses. The pyramid texts predate him by 1500 to 1000 years. The *Tale of Sinuhe* is a narrative story from Abraham's period. There is wisdom literature, like the advice from a father to a son against adultery that looks very biblical. There are also hymns, like the *Hymn to the Sun* from Moses' own time period, which elevates one god above all others. There are royal records, including records of military campaigns written by officials out in the field, providing a parallel for how we might imagine Moses and some of his co-officials, like Joshua, writing down events as they happened in the field.

Egyptian sources

Example	Year	Origin	Type	Significance
Pyramid texts	29 th -25 th century	Egypt	Pyramid texts	Shows early theological sophistication
Tale of Sinuhe	1960 BC	Egypt	Narrative	Gives picture of the times of Abraham
Instruction of Vizeier Ptah-hotep	2450 BC	Egypt	Wisdom	Example of ANE wisdom advice including advice against adultery
Universalist Hymn to the Sun	1413-1377 BC	Egypt	Hymn	Elevates one god above all others and asserts self-existence
Hymn of Victory of Mer-ne-Ptah	1230 BC	Egypt	Hymn/royal annal	Mentions Israel as a people not in Egypt
Annals of Thutmose III	1490-1436 BC	Egypt	Royal annals	Royal officials recorded campaigns in the field, which may also be supposed of Moses.

So, here is our response to the assumption that the Pentateuch came down as oral tradition.

Response to the 1st Assumption: *By the time of the life of Moses, the empires of the Ancient Near East were all producing written records.*

The record given to us in the Pentateuch fits with the times in which it claims to have been produced. Our response is not only that Egypt was writing during the time of Moses, but that all the major empires were writing. The Sumerians were writing. The Hittites were writing. The Babylonians were writing. We have king lists and flood stories and Hammurabi's law code. We have all the suzerain-vassal treaties. We have the Armana letters, around the time of Joshua's conquest of the promise land, written by Canaanite rulers to Egypt asking for help against invaders. No help came.

Other sources

Example	Year	Origin	Type	Significance
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Sumerian king lists	Early 2 nd millennium	Sumer	List form	Genealogical lists as found in Pentateuch. Refers to a flood. Long lives of kings before flood, not after.
Gudea King of Lagash	2143-2124 BC	Sumer	Royal annal	Dreamed of a pattern of a temple he must build parallel to a heavenly temple.
Royal annals	2 nd millennium	Hittite kingdom	Royal annal	Covenant lawsuit material – what happens when a vassal breaks covenant.
International treaties	2 nd millennium	Hittite kingdom	2 nd mill. treaty form	Parallels treaty form used in Pentateuch.
Code of Hammurabi	18 th century BC	Babylon	Law code	Parallels to Pentateuch law code.
Armana letters	14 th century BC	Canaanite	Letter	Rulers ask Egypt for help against attacking force. Could be a reference to the conquest of Canaan by the Israelites.

That is our first assumption that the text came down orally. The assumption that the Hebrew tradition was not written as it happened but passed down orally over hundreds of years before being put into written form. We can reject that assumption for the writings that come from the time of Moses. Peoples were writing. Moses could have written just as the Bible says Moses wrote.

Another assumption by supporters of the documentary hypothesis, is that the style of the Pentateuch is best explained by various authors.

2nd Assumption: *The style of the Pentateuch is best explained by various authors.*

So, we are going to have to consider some examples of style. And here are three points of style that scholars have noticed.

1. *First, the name used for God is varied throughout the Pentateuch.*

For example, the first account of Creation in Genesis 1:1-2:3 uses the name Elohim usually translated as God in English, whereas the second account of Creation in Genesis 2:4-25 consistently uses Yahweh Elohim, translated as LORD God. Why do that? Why just use the name Elohim in basically the first chapter and the name Yahweh in the second chapter? Well, some scholars suggested that one author wrote the first account, another author wrote the second account, and a third person put the two accounts together.

2. *Second, shifts occur in some texts between the 1st person and the 3rd person.*

This happens more in the Psalms and the prophets. You will be reading along as the prophet speaks about God in the 3rd person, “The Lord says to Israel...” and then the text will switch to first person, “I say to you O Israel...” And you are left for a moment wondering who is the “I”? And then you figure out that it is the Lord. It just switched. Well, for example, in Exodus 3:15, where Moses is supposed to tell the people the LORD God has sent him, he then is to switch into first person as though speaking for God and say, “This is My name forever and this is my memorial name to all generations.” So, there is supposed to be a switch from 3rd person about God to 1st person as though God is speaking directly.

To be honest, when I read that sort of thing, I just think, “Well, that is the style of the Bible.” But some scholars think it indicates two different styles of two different writers, one who wrote in 1st person and another who wrote in 3rd person, and then they get mashed together by an editor.

3. *Third, repetition and doublets are used regularly.*

I mentioned the issue with doublets in our Isaac and Jacob lesson, where you have two stories of meeting a wife at a well or two stories of lying about a wife being your wife. And documentary scholars would say, "See, two different authors producing different versions of a story put together later by an editor." Along with doublets we frequently see direct repetition in biblical text. For example, a person will repeat almost word for word what the Lord or some other person has said to them, such as when Abraham's servant takes up 5 Bible verses in Genesis 24:37-41 to repeat exactly what Abraham had just said in verses 3-8 at the beginning of the chapter. In our day that kind of repetition within the same chapter would be considered poor style. Even more difficult to swallow is the major repetition that happens in Exodus 36-40. This is typically where you stop reading Exodus, where the text repeats all the different materials needed to put together the tabernacle in the same language just used by God when he gave the vision of the tabernacle to Moses in chapters 25-30. What's up with all that repetition killing the flow of the narrative for us modern readers?

These are all logical questions that come up just from observing the stylistic curiosities in the biblical text, from the different names of God to the switches between 1st and 3rd person to frequent repetition of exact phrases or blocks of text. And for modern authors that can look like bad style. The documentary hypothesis scholars claim these stylistic quirks are examples of various sources being edited by a final author. That is how they explain the bad style.

And that sounds logical. But then archaeology started giving us a multitude of written documents from the time of Moses for us to consider. And to be honest, this was not material that was available to Julius Welhausen. He did not have these archaeological finds when he was trying to figure this stuff out. What we find is that ancient near eastern literature uses various names for the same god in the same document, shifts from 1st person to 3rd person in a passage, and repeats dialogue word for word in the same text. There is a well-preserved example in the Hittite legend. You can look this up on the internet. It is called King Kirta (or King Keret, depending on who is translating the title), and not only does it include shifts from 1st to 3rd person as you are going along, but it also includes this section of a dream given to King Kirta. It is a long dream and it is given to him by the god El and then it is all repeated verbatim as Kirta carries out the instructions that he was given by El. It is very much like the vision for the tabernacle Moses receives and then carries out.

So, then here is our response to the assumption about style implying various authors.

Response to the 2nd Assumption: *On the contrary, the style of the Pentateuch matches the style of other ancient near eastern documents which are presumed to be written by one author.*

The logic made sense, but the assumption proved false. Rather than suggesting multiple authors, these quirks of biblical style suggest that the Pentateuch fits well within the style preferences of the ancient near eastern literature. We have to step outside our cultural prejudice on what denotes good style and that will allow us to then consider the effect accomplished by the style the ancients used. So, instead of seeing the two names of God in Genesis 1 and 2 as suggesting different authors or poor writing, we are led to ask, "Why would the same author use these two different names. Why Elohim in the first story and Yahweh in the second?" If I understand that as being intentional, that changes how I approach the text. Now I am asking, "What is the author, what is Moses communicating?" Now, I might come to recognize that the name Elohim communicates to the ancients that we are speaking about God as supreme who rules over everything, the God who creates everything. That is what I get from the name Elohim. And then the same God who is Elohim is also Yahweh. And when we are using the name Yahweh Elohim that suggests immanence or presence of God with man. He is the one who brings man into covenant relationship with himself. Which is more the theme of Genesis 2. So, in this sense the name of God used in the context could direct us toward the theological theme or could work together with the theological theme of the section.

Likewise, with the repetition, instead of assuming we have bad style or multiple authors, we can accept that we have ancient near eastern style and focus our thinking on, “Why would an author use this style? Why would a servant repeat the exact words of his master or of his Lord?” Well, one reason would be to show obedience. “This is what my master told me. This is what I am doing.” Another reason would be for the biblical author to emphasize a point. If you repeat something twice, even if it is in the mouth of two different people, then it emphasizes the point being made by the speech. Often with biblical dialogue the repetition is meant to highlight a slight change in the words. I have learned this. You should always look. Is there a little change? It sounds like repetition, but it is not quite. So, when Eve repeats the command about the tree, telling the serpent, “God has said, ‘You shall not eat from it or touch it, lest you die.’” The close observer recognizes that Eve added “or touch it” to the command of God and then you are left wondering, “Why did she do that? Why did Eve add that little bit?” It raises a question.

So, we have responded to the second assumption that the style of the Bible implies various authors. And we have said, “No. It actually fits very well with ancient literature.” The third assumption is similar to the style assumption. It is this.

3rd Assumption: *The structure of the Pentateuch is best explained by various authors.*

I have commented some on structure. If you remember when we talked about the overlapping pattern that biblical authors sometimes use, such as in the story of Isaac overlapping the stories of Abraham and Jacob. That is in Genesis 24-26. And then, there is also the presence of the Judah narrative in Genesis 38 right in the middle of the Joseph story. If we consider this to be bad stitching together of various authors by an editor, we miss what Moses is doing with skillfully weaving Judah into the Joseph story, both as a foil to highlight the character of Joseph and also as the brother who will share with Joseph in the final prophecies regarding the first-born. There is a reason that the Judah story is there. Ancient near eastern parallels can help us recognize these structures that maybe we are not used to in our modern day and thereby help us better interpret what the author is communicating. So, here are two more examples.

1. First, the use of the suzerain-vassal treaty form explains the unity of the various genres found in the book of Deuteronomy.

One of the challenges we are going to see when we read Deuteronomy comes from the shifts of genre through the whole book. You think you are reading one thing and then all of the sudden it becomes something else. You start with historical narrative, and then you move into something like sermon or theological reasoning, which then becomes a long list of laws before you shift into a chapter on curses and a chapter on blessings after which you get more theological reasoning and finally historical narrative which includes a couple of hymns and a report of Moses’ death.

If this is the work of a final editor without any structuring principle, we would have to say that it is a fairly poor job of editing. So, what is the structuring principle. Well, there is more than one. I am going to give you one now, and the other you are going to have to wait until we get to Deuteronomy.

A hundred years ago if you asked a biblical scholar, what genre or literary form contains narrative, law, blessings and curses, they would have said, “None.” We had no archaeological evidence of any such form. Now we have thousands of documents containing this mix of genre. Do you have a guess at what it is? These are the elements we see in the multitude of suzerain-vassal treaties discovered in the ancient near east. We have the title of the great king, a historical prologue, general and detailed stipulations, commands for regular reading and deposition, a call of witnesses, a list of blessing, and a list of curses. All of these elements are present in the book of Deuteronomy. Moses took the suzerain-vassal treaty as a basic form and then he developed it into a fantastic piece of ancient near eastern literature.

And interestingly, these are the elements of a second millennium suzerain-vassal treaty, not a first millennium suzerain-vassal treaty. Scholars have noticed a shift in the pattern from the second millennium to the first millennium. So, before David, in the time of Abraham and Moses, you would

encounter one form and after David during the time of the divided kingdom and the exile you would encounter another form. The changes involved dropping out the historical prologue, dropping out the requirement of deposition and reading, and no more blessings. It was a streamlining of covenant. Forget our past relationship, who cares, forget the blessings and you can read it or not, that's up to you. What we are left with is the king's title, a call of witness, the stipulations and the curses. Basically, "Do this law, or I will curse you." That is what you get in the first millennium. And it is not the form that we recognize in Deuteronomy, which includes all the older elements, like the command for regular reading and deposition in Deuteronomy 31:10 and 25, a call to heaven and earth as witnesses in Deuteronomy 32:1, a historical prologue in chapters 1-3, and a list of blessings in 28:1-14.

This is why this is important. The documentary hypothesis theorizes that King Josiah had Deuteronomy written in 621 BC, about 400 years after this second millennium treaty form had become obsolete. So, either Josiah's scribes produced a truly remarkable bit of historical fiction, or Deuteronomy was written according to the form of its times during the second millennium, before David. The historical fact that has come to light in the discover of all these ancient suzerain-vassal treaty documents is that Deuteronomy fits 1400 BC and the time of Moses much better than 621 BC and the time of Josiah. That is the fact. How we interpret that fact is then up to us.

Here is one final example about structure. And it is this.

2. Chiasm explains the repetitions found in the flood narrative while also showing the high level of unity in that story.

The flood narrative in Genesis 6:9 – 9:19 really gets torn apart by the documentary hypothesis with various parts attributed to the J source, other parts to the P source, and other parts to some final editor. One of the observations that supposedly supports various authors is the requirement for Noah to take on board two pairs of all animals in chapter 6 and then the requirement in chapter 7 that he take on board seven pairs of clean animals. For the life of me, I cannot understand why this is proof of more than one author. Critics say this is evidence of two authors because the first author just knew about the two pairs and the second author wanted to make sure there were seven pairs of clean animals. But if that's the case, I say it is also evidence of poor editing. It really would not have been that hard for the editor to adjust one set of instructions to fit the other set of instructions, so that they both match. So, that either in chapter 6 we have two pairs plus seven pairs of clean animals or in chapter 7 we have two pairs plus seven pairs of clean animals. You can really easily put them together. But in the end it is not really that much of a mystery, after all. Why add the seven pairs of clean animals in chapter 7? Well, if we are going to sacrifice some lambs when we get out of the ark, we better have more than two. That's not so hard to figure out. And I did not need the author to tell me that in chapter 6. If he adds it in chapter 7, I can figure out what is going on.

What we have in the flood account is not a stitching together of several stories. What we have is an artfully communicated, unified narrative. We are not trained to look for chiasmic parallels in literature, so we often do not see this. Our western training is much more linear. But once start looking, once you start seeing biblical examples, then you begin to notice parallelism in the Bible. And when that happens you start seeing it quite frequently, because it is there a lot.

For example, with the flood story, have you ever noticed that 40 days of rain is not the only use of the number 40 in the story? Probably not, because we know the Sunday School story and the 40 is just mentioned once. And so, when we read it, we do not even notice that there are two 40s. Or have you noticed that the number 150? And that the number 150 is used twice? As it turns out, the flood narrative is an 11-part chiasm. We start and end with a reference to Noah and his three sons. One reference to Noah and his sons would fit well with what we have seen throughout Genesis, but the double reference, that stands out. That is not happening throughout Genesis. So, to see Noah and his three sons at the beginning and Noah and his three sons at the end suggests parallelism. And that gets us to start looking. What do we see in between?

A Noah and sons (6:9-10)

- B Vow to destroy thru flood/promise to establish covenant (6:11-22)
 - C Entrance into the ark, clean animals for sacrifice mentioned (7:1-9)
 - D The Flood begins, 40 days of rain mentioned, reference to year, month, day (7:10-16)
 - E The Waters prevail for 150 days (7:17-24)
 - F God remembers Noah (8:1a)
 - E' The Waters recede for 150 days (8:1-5b)
 - D' The Flood ends, 40 days after mountains visible, reference to year, month, day (8:6-14)
 - C' Exit from the ark, clean animals for sacrifice mentioned (8:15-22)
 - B' Vow not to destroy thru flood/establishment of covenant (9:1-17)
 - A' Noah and sons (9:18-19)³

In the second frame in 6:11-22, we have a vow to destroy the earth by flood and a promise of covenant then in 9:1-17 we have a promise never again to destroy the earth by flood and the cutting of covenant. In the third frame, we have in 7:1-9 the family of Noah entering the ark and the clean animals being mentioned then in 8:15-22 the family of Noah exiting the ark and the clean animals being mentioned. In the fourth frame we have in 7:10-16 40 days of rain and the mention of the year, month and day, then again in 8:6-14 another mention of 40 days after the appearance of the mountain tops and the mention of the year, month and day. Finally, in 7:17-24 the waters prevailing for 150 days followed in 8:1b-5 by the waters receding for 150 days.

In the very center of the chiasm we have these words in 8:1a, "But God remembered Noah and all the beast and all the cattle that were with him in the ark..." We know this does not mean that God forgot all about Noah, like he got distracted." The language that God remembered is covenantal language. It means that God brought to mind the promise he had made to Noah. He did not forget Noah during the chaos of the storm, but he carried him through just as he had promised.

The structures of ancient near eastern literature do not support the assumption that the Pentateuch is best explained by various authors. To the contrary, we can now give this response.

***Response to the 3rd Assumption:** The structure of the Pentateuch is best explained as well unified literature employing ancient near eastern forms.*

The archaeological discoveries in ancient near eastern literature have done what archaeological findings steadily do, prove that the Bible is the most accurate source text for its times. And yet, I believe that the many scholars will continue to hold the Bible up to higher standards than they hold any other ancient text and will continue to feel the need to distance their own opinions from the assertions of scripture. I believe many scholars hold to two basic presuppositions that affect how they think and feel about the Bible.

First, there is widespread anti-supernaturalism in the modern scholarly world. This underlies everything. Scholars are under pressure to reject the belief that God acts in our world. So, if Deuteronomy predicts that a king will reign in Israel or that Israel will experience the full curse of destruction and exile, then Deuteronomy must have been written after those events because prophecy is supernatural and the supernatural does not happen. Therefore, prophecy does not happen. Maybe it got written just before the events happened, so that it is a pretty good guess. A 621 BC writing of Deuteronomy removes all the supernatural from the prophecies in the book.

This anti-supernatural bias can underlie the view of scholars who otherwise seem positive about the biblical story. Recently, I listened to a couple of interviews of the Canadian psychologist Jordan Peterson who champions many conservative values and clearly loves Old Testament narrative. Yet, as you listen closely, you discern that Peterson's view of God and the stories of the Bible align with a rejection of the supernatural. He is a psychologist, and he has a very high view of the human mind.

³ This chiastic outline depends on examples provided by Duane Garrett in *Rethinking Genesis*, David Dorsey in *The Literary Structure of the Old Testament*, and Gordon Wenham in *WBC Vol. I Genesis 1-15*.

And that is how he understands religion. Religion is a product of the human mind. He loves the story of creation, and of Cain and Abel, and of Jesus, because he sees in these stories support for his worldview, his narrative, which while supporting conservative values, rejects the objective existence of God. So, when we take something potentially good from a scholar like Jordan Peterson, we also need to recognize what are his presuppositions. What are underlying his views and his claims.

Along with this anti-supernatural presupposition, some scholars also hold to an anti-religious bias. Not only does the Bible purport supernatural interaction in the world, but the Bible itself is a religious book and so some scholars assume cannot be taken seriously as history. If the source is religious, then it cannot be objective.

We can push back against both presuppositions. It is actually irrational to claim a belief in God and then assert that God cannot work in the world supernaturally. If belief in God is rational, then belief that God acts is rational. If God is real, then we should expect supernatural events to be part of the historical record. Or we have a false record.

And though religious people are biased, that does not mean that religious people cannot produce accurate history. All people are biased. A Marxist historian is going to lean towards an interpretation of history that supports his views. An atheist is going to lean towards an interpretation that supports his views. And both will choose what to write about in history according to what their worldviews claim to be significant. All people have presuppositions that underlie their interpretation of the world and their interpretation of history. Everybody acts out of a worldview.

As Christians, we can learn from all people. We owe a great debt to archeologists and scholars of ancient history, whether Christian or not Christian, who have provided us with invaluable insight into the times and cultures that surround biblical history. We should be grateful. At the same time, we should also be discerning, recognizing that scholars are going to interpret the historical data according to their own presuppositions. And they usually are not going to tell you what those presuppositions are.

These are my presuppositions. The LORD God he is true. He has created the heavens and the earth. He is not defined by us. We are defined by him. He is not a result of our imagination. We are a result of his imagination. And because he is good and powerful and loving and wise, he has communicated to us through his word, the Bible.

Reflection Questions

1. Have you encountered the Documentary hypothesis before? (That the first five books were not written by Moses or any other one author but are a collection of writings by various sources identified as JEDP which were put together by a final editor.)
2. Have you heard that the Hebrews handed down their traditions orally, not writing them until much later? What stands out to you in the two above charts providing samples of ANE literature?
3. Consider the responses made to the 2nd and 3rd assumptions about ancient near eastern style and ancient near eastern structure. How could understanding the style and structure help us to interpret Scripture? What principles come to mind?
4. If a scholar does not believe that supernatural events can occur, then how might that belief affect his or her interpretation of the biblical text?
5. What do you think about the statement, "We cannot trust religious texts as accurate historical sources?" What are some of the pros to that idea and some of the cons?

Lesson 9: Exodus 1-4 Moses' Backstory

Introduction

¹ Now these are the names of the sons of Israel who came to Egypt with Jacob; they came each one with his household: ² Reuben, Simeon, Levi and Judah; ³ Issachar, Zebulun and Benjamin; ⁴ Dan and Naphtali, Gad and Asher. ⁵ All the persons who came from the loins of Jacob were seventy in number, but Joseph was *already* in Egypt. ⁶ Joseph died, and all his brothers and all that generation. ⁷ But the sons of Israel were fruitful and increased greatly, and multiplied, and became exceedingly mighty, so that the land was filled with them. ⁸ Now a new king arose over Egypt, who did not know Joseph. Exodus 1:1–8

The Book of Exodus. Our kingdom motif consists of six elements: a king, a people, a covenant, a prophet, a land and a palace for the great king. Where do we stand now at the beginning of Exodus? God intends to establish for himself a kingdom of priests, a holy nation. Yet, we seem to have gone backward rather than forward. The sons of Israel came to Egypt, guests of Pharaoh on behalf of Joseph. But that Pharaoh is long dead. The current Pharaoh knows nothing of Joseph. He has enslaved the Hebrews, fearing their number. And he has commanded, "Every son who is born you are to cast into the Nile (Exodus 1:22)."

After 400 years in Egypt, according to the prophecy given to Abraham, we have a people, though they are slaves to their Egyptian masters. We have no free nation, no covenant law for that nation, no land, no temple, and the people may feel like they have no God. Where is God? I titled Genesis "Kingdom Prologue." There the Israelites' relationship to God was defined. We know who they are. We know how they got to Egypt. We have come to know a lot about their relationship to God who is both covenant King as the one who reigns over all mankind, and also covenant King in special relationship initiated through the promise made to Abraham. And we know that they struggle to be faithful in that covenant relationship.

Exodus: Kingdom Establishment

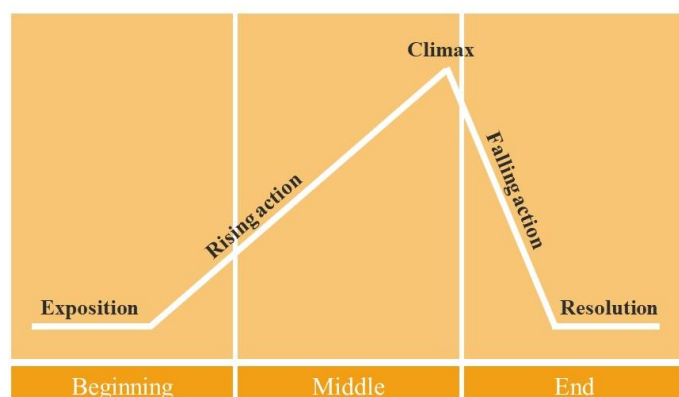
Key Passages: 19:6; 34:6-7

| Chapters 1-18 | Chapters 19-24 | Chapters 25-40 |
|------------------------|---------------------|-----------------------------|
| God redeems the nation | God cuts a covenant | God indwells the tabernacle |
| King, mediator, people | Covenant | Palace |

Israel has now grown way beyond the size of one family. We have a people. God is going to formally establish Israel as a nation by freeing them from Egypt and giving them a defining covenant of law. I have titled Exodus "Kingdom Established." That is what God is going to do here. Establish for himself a kingdom. We can take Exodus in a simple three-part division. God redeems a people in chapters 1-18. God cuts covenant to form a nation in 19-24. And God indwells the tabernacle in 25-40.

That is the broad stroke outline we will use. Its also helpful to think about Exodus as a great narrative. The historic reality of what God did, redeeming Israel out of Egypt is amazing, and Moses did a fantastic job telling that story. The Greeks argued that every good story has a beginning, a middle and an end. And that includes five stages: exposition, rising action, climax, falling action, and resolution. Exposition gives us the background. So, in a super hero tale, this is the origin story, the teenage kid gets bit

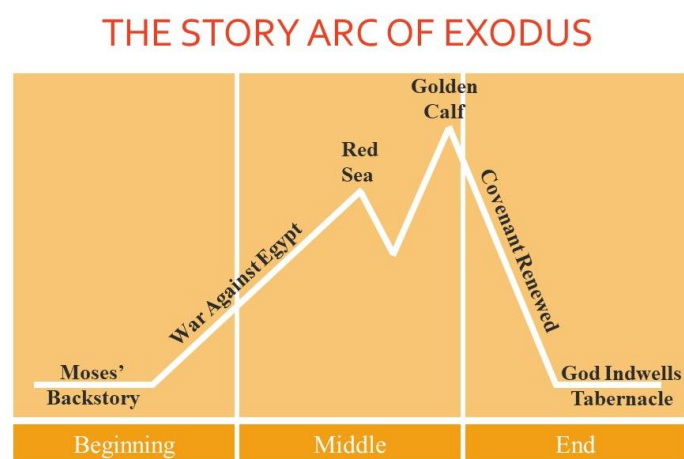
THE FIVE STAGES OF A GOOD STORY



by a radioactive spider. In our rising action the super hero tries out his powers, meets a girl, encounters a villain, considers giving it all up, but the villain takes the girl. And now the stage is set for the climax. On one side of the bridge dangles the sweetheart, on the other side of the bridge a bus full of children, and the villain hovers above. How does our super hero get out of this? In ancient Greece, comedy means the hero wins and saves the day. Tragedy means everybody dies. So, what is going to happen? Whatever happens, once we are past the conflict, whether it is tragic or comedic, we move into falling action. Will they get married or will he give her up to save her from danger, resigned to fight crime alone? Resolution wraps up the story. It would be the wedding or the lonely webslinger swinging off into a New York sunset.

That is the structure of a good story. And I don't know if Moses was following that structure, but it really helps to think about Exodus as a well, crafted narrative. So, let's think about it in that way. Let's start with the climax. What would you say is the climatic moment of Exodus, the moment where all the tension builds to this supreme event? What's the climax? There are a few options that might come to mind. People usually think about the end of slavery in Egypt, so the Red Sea really stands out. God decisively demolished the army of a superpower to secure the freedom of his people. The Egyptian military is wiped out under the waves as the people of Israel watch safely on the far bank. So, the Red Sea is a good choice. The Red Sea ought to be our climax. The rest should be falling action, a song of deliverance, the journey to Sinai, the cutting of covenant, and the building of the tabernacle in which God's glory comes to dwell in our final scene of resolution. It is not that the falling action is unimportant. It is just that the tension has been passed. And we are simply working out the rest of the plan, the rest of the story.

But that is not how the story goes. It does not all just nicely work out after the Red Sea. There is a major twist. The Red Sea is the false climax. It is a climatic event, but it is not the real problem of the story. There is a twist that reveals this theological truth. It is one thing to get Israel out of Egypt. It is another thing entirely to get Egypt out of Israel. The true climax of Exodus comes after covenant has been cut on Mt. Sinai. And Moses has gone back up on the mountain. And the Israelites make a golden calf to worship. It had appeared that the enemy of Israel was external, the Egyptians. That's our problem. Our problem is outside of us. But now we see that an insidious enemy resides within the heart of every member of that people. Really in the heart of every man and every woman. Rebellion dwells within. So, wherever we go, our sinful nature invites destruction from a holy God. That is the climax that must be resolved. What will God do with such a people? How does he avoid tragedy, where everybody dies?



According to the five stages of a good story, we start with exposition, so chapters 1-4, the backstory of Moses. Then we have rising action in chapters 5-31 from the time Moses sets off for Egypt to the covenant cut on Mt. Sinai. The climax comes in chapter 32 with the golden calf. And what follows that incident, that is our falling action. And it leads to resolution which comes in the final paragraph.

So, in this lesson we are just going to cover exposition or backstory. I am going to address that backstory in three parts. So, this will be chapters 1-4. First, the origin story, that's chapters 1-2. Then the call of Moses, 3:1-4:17. And finally the setting out of Moses in 4:18-31.

We start with the origin story.

I. Origin Story (1-2)

Chapter 1 explains to us briefly, but believably, how the status of the Israelites shifted from favored friends to slaves. They had settled in Egypt by the goodwill of a former Pharaoh. The text says, “they were fruitful and increased greatly, and multiplied and became exceedingly mighty [or numerous], so that the land was filled with them.” The promise God made to Abraham was coming to bear. His descendants were fruitful like stars in the sky, too fruitful for the Egyptians.

Egyptologists tell us that the 14th through 17th dynasties of Egypt struggled with or were ruled by a foreign mix of peoples called the Hyksos. That was from about 1700 BC to 1540 BC. After that the native Egyptians re-established control. And looking into the Bible, the earlier date of the Exodus proposed by biblical scholars is 1446 BC. That comes from 1 Kings 6:1 which tells us that the 4th year of the reign of Solomon was the 480th year anniversary of the Exodus. So, we can date that back to 1446 BC. So, taking that date of the Exodus, places the life of Moses just after the Hyksos period. Egypt had just come out of foreign domination by the Hyksos. So, Egyptian fear of a massive Semitic nation in their midst makes a lot of sense with that biblical dating.

This Pharaoh goes about suppressing the potential Hebrew threat in a particularly nasty way, enslaving the nation and ordering baby Hebrew boys to be thrown into the Nile river. That’s what Moses’ mother does, though she does it rather gently. She places him into the river in a basket. Moses is found by a princess of Egypt and raised in Pharaoh’s household, though in the beginning nursed by his own mother.

So, we have to imagine what growing up was like for Moses. The text skips ahead to a grown Moses, telling us in 2:11 that he “went out to his brethren and looked on their hard labors; and he saw an Egyptian beating a Hebrew.” Moses then killed that Egyptian and hid his body. Later, Moses tried to break up two Hebrews fighting, but they retorted, “Who made you a prince or a judge over us (2:14)?”

I see a couple of things in this story. First, Moses shows classic signs of a third culture kid. He is neither fully accepted as Egyptian nor fully accepted as Hebrew. He does not seem to be sure of his own identity. The text said that he went out to his brethren, suggesting he does consider himself in some way a Hebrew. But he does not live with them and probably does not dress like them. So, the two Hebrews look at him and ask, “Who made you are prince or a judge over us?” “You dress like a wealthy Egyptian, but you have no authority over us. You are not one of our leaders.” We don’t accept you.

The second thing that stands out is a foreshadowing of what is to come. Moses sees himself in some way as a protector or savior of the Hebrews. He is moved by their plight. And so, he strikes out rashly without wisdom. Maybe he had fantasies in his head, connected to his own search for identity as a Hebrew, that he was in the house of Pharaoh for this reason, to be the liberator of his people. You can imagine him creating this story in his mind that makes sense of childhood. But that fantasy comes crashing down. Now he is only afraid. And rightly so. Pharaoh may have tolerated his daughter’s whim of raising up a Hebrew brat, but Pharaoh will not tolerate a Hebrew killing an Egyptian. He decides to kill Moses. So, Moses flees to Midian, where he sits down by a well.

And what happens? He finds a wife of course; lovely places, those ancient near eastern wells. They were like dance clubs or college Christians organizations. Moses marries Zipporah, has a son, and settles down to the life of a shepherd. He lives this life for forty years. The dream of liberating Israel was put aside long ago as immature fantasy. He has a new identity, a new home, a new purpose. And then we read about the cries of Israel. 2:24 says, “God heard their groaning; and God remembered His covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.” That’s the same verb used at the height of the flood. “God remembered Noah.” Just like then, this remembering here does not mean that God got busy and forgot about the Israelites for 400 years. Where does the time go? This remembering is a covenantal remembering. God never forgot. The remembering emphasizes the saving action of God. Now is the time he has chosen to act. God remembers.

This is the origin story of Moses. 40 years in Pharaoh's household. 40 years as a Midianite shepherd. That's a long origin story? But now God is ready to act. So, why did God wait so long? Why didn't God use Moses when he was younger, when he had the vision and the vigor to act as a deliverer? I am sure God had all kinds of reasons for the timing. One thing we see is God's sovereign preparation of the person he plans to use.

It is fascinating to think about what kind of person Moses had become. First, Moses had to learn humility. He had to give up his grand visions. God gave him great opportunity to be humbled. If you want to be humbled, get married, have a child, live as a foreigner in a culture not your own, learn a job you have never performed. Moses had great opportunity to learn humility. And there is more. How did Moses' experiences prepare him for the task God would call him to? He would lead Israel from Egypt to the Promised Land, and he would write the Torah. This is his task. How did the first 80 years of life prepare Moses for that?

Well, he is being told to go to Pharaoh. And Moses was acquainted with the house of Egypt. He had grown up there. He was familiar with the halls of Egyptian power. He could have been taught there the literature of his day. Thinking about writing the Torah, Moses was one who was familiar, potentially, with narrative, and law, and royal records, and poetry, written by Egyptians and Hittites and Babylonians. He was likely tri-lingual, learning Hebrew from his mother, Egyptian from his foster mother, and Midianite from his wife. Taking the Israelites from Egypt to the wilderness, he would be taking them where he had led sheep for 40 years. He knew the geography. He knew where to find food and water. He knew how to live out there. He had learned to lead sheep. Moses has this strange blend of one at home in the halls of Egypt, identified with Hebrew slaves, and comfortable roaming the wilderness as any Midianite shepherd. Moses' whole life had been preparation in character, knowledge, and skills which God now intends to put to use.

That is the origin story of Moses. The text next turns to the call of Moses.

II. Moses' Call (3:1-4:23)



Out in the wilderness, God appears to Moses through a burning bush. It is a holy place, a holy meeting. Why a burning bush? Here is the text. It seems important in the text. "And the angel of the LORD appeared to him in a blazing fire from the midst of a bush; and he looked, and behold, the bush was burning with fire, yet the bush was not consumed (Exodus 3:2)." In verse 3 Moses emphasizes the strangeness of what he sees, "I must turn aside now, and see this marvelous sight, why the bush is not burned up (3:3)."

We might conclude that the bush is not burned up simply because it was meant to be a miracle to attract Moses' attention. God is just trying to get him to come over. I think there is more to it, a lot more. I think the bush symbolizes the main theological point of the book of Exodus. I think Moses is suggesting to us the question we should be asking, "Why is the bush not burned up?" What does that symbolize? Why is that important? I am going to leave that question for you to reflect on. You think about that as we are going through the book of Exodus. What is the symbolism of the burning bush? It is more than just the presence of God. It is more than that. It symbolizes a theological truth. And I promise I will come back to that before we finish the book Exodus. But you think on it.

Here is the message from the bush. This is what God declares to Moses in verse 8, "I have come down to deliver my people from the power of the Egyptians and to bring them up from that land to a good and spacious land." Moses hears the words of God and fears. He fears God speaking, which is a right response if you hear the voice of God. He may also hear and be glad. Glad can join in that holy fear, the gladness that God is going to deliver Israel. But he has not heard the whole plan, yet. And he is not going to be excited when he does. Let's read the plan. This is what God says next. This is 3:10-15.

¹⁰ "Therefore, come now, and I will send you to Pharaoh, so that you may bring My people, the sons of Israel, out of Egypt." ¹¹ But Moses said to God, "Who am I, that I should go to Pharaoh,

and that I should bring the sons of Israel out of Egypt?" ¹² And He said, "Certainly I will be with you, and this shall be the sign to you that it is I who have sent you: when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall worship God at this mountain." ¹³ Then Moses said to God, "Behold, I am going to the sons of Israel, and I will say to them, 'The God of your fathers has sent me to you.' Now they may say to me, 'What is His name?' What shall I say to them?" ¹⁴ God said to Moses, "I AM WHO I AM"; and He said, "Thus you shall say to the sons of Israel, 'I AM has sent me to you.' " ¹⁵ God, furthermore, said to Moses, "Thus you shall say to the sons of Israel, 'The LORD, the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you.' This is My name forever, and this is My memorial-name to all generations.

1. Moses' first refusal and the name of God (3:10-22)

This is the shocker for Moses, "I will send you to Pharaoh." The plan is not just about God's act of deliverance. The plan is to include Moses. God involves his people in his works of salvation. And upon hearing he is to be involved, Moses then asks the wrong question. It is the natural question. It is the question we often feel when we realize that God wants us to do something that we can't do, and we don't want to do. Moses asks, "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and that I should bring the sons of Israel out of Egypt?" He is thinking, "I don't have the power to do this. I don't have the credibility to do this. I don't know what I would say or do. I don't even know how to get started. Why would Pharaoh give me an audience? Who am I to do this thing? What if I mess it up? What if I say the wrong thing? What if I make the wrong choices? I am just a shepherd. Who am I?"

God responds, "I will be with you." It is the same thing Jesus told his disciples after giving them the great commission in Matthew 28:18-20, "And lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age." Moses follows up with the right question. He asks God what to tell the Israelites when they ask who sent him. He asks what name to give them. That is the right question to ask when God tells us to do something, not "Who am I?" but "Who are you?" Who you are is secondary. Who the God is who is calling you that is the key question.

And God says, tell them "I Am Who I Am." This is the name, Yahweh. In the Hebrew it could mean "I was who I was," "I am who I am," "I will be who I will be." God is the God who was, and is, and is to come. He is the same yesterday, today, and forever. God is. He exists independently of any created thing. He is completely whole. He is completely able. He is complete. He is the God who is. I am. Yahweh is the name Genesis 2 uses when he breathes life into Adam. By the name Yahweh, he promised Noah in Genesis 8:21 to never again destroy the earth by water. By the name Yahweh, he called Abraham in Genesis 12:1, and he cut covenant with him in Genesis 15. By this name he renewed covenant with Isaac in Genesis 26 and with Jacob in Genesis 28. Yahweh is the one who makes covenant. He is the God who is, and the God who invites people into relationship with him. He is both transcendent, and he is immanent. Who are you to proclaim the news that God has come to save? You are the servant of Yahweh, that's who you are.

2. Moses' second refusal and miraculous signs (4:1-9)

Moses is not yet convinced. In 4:1 he asks, "What if they will not believe me, or listen to what I say? For they may say, 'The Lord has not appeared to you.'" That's a fair question. Moses will be asking them to stake their lives on his leadership. So, God empowers Moses to miraculously change his staff to a snake and to cause leprosy. Moses sees these miracles himself, which ironically show us the weakness of miracles to cause true belief in the heart of a man. Because even after having performed the miracles himself, Moses is still unchanged in heart. He still does not want to go. And he gives a third excuse. This is 4:10-12.

3. Moses' third refusal and the gift of speech (4:10-12)

¹⁰ Then Moses said to the LORD, "Please, Lord, I have never been eloquent, neither recently nor in time past, nor since You have spoken to Your servant; for I am slow of speech and slow of tongue." ¹¹ The LORD said to him, "Who has made man's mouth? Or who makes *him* mute or

deaf, or seeing or blind? Is it not I, the LORD?¹² “Now then go, and I, even I, will be with your mouth, and teach you what you are to say.”

It makes you wonder why God continued patiently with Moses after this excuse. Moses points out that he has never been eloquent, “In case you have not noticed, God.” And he adds to this, “neither recently nor in time past, [and catch this] nor since you have spoken to your servant.” “Nor since you have spoken to your servant.” “I have never been a good speaker Lord. In my youth I was a man of action and that did not work out the best. Since then, I have worked with sheep. Not much eloquence is required with sheep. I have never been good with words, and if you have not noticed God that has not changed in the short amount of time you have been speaking with me.”

Woah. It takes some kind of courage to say that to God. We should maybe pick up some frustration in God’s tone, even though he is still being patient with Moses. And he says, “Who has made man’s mouth?” And he says again I will be with you. “I will be with your mouth.” “I will give you the gift of speech. I will guide you in what to say.” Again, it is not about your skillfulness Moses. That is not why I chose you. And that should be enough. Moses has learned humility and that is good. But he has swung from self-confidence to serious self-doubt. He is certainly not over-confident anymore. But godly humility is not the same thing as self-recrimination. “I am not good. I have nothing to offer. I can’t do this.” With godly humility you look at yourself with sober acknowledgement of who you are not and also who God has made you to be. Godly humility takes that sober reflection of self and adds faith to it. “I have a lot of weaknesses Lord. There are strengths, too, a lot of weaknesses. I cannot do this thing you are asking. But you can. You would not be telling me to do it, if you did not have a plan. I am scared. I do not see how it is going to work out. But I will give you all I have got. I will trust you. You are the deliverer. And I am with you.”

That’s the godly humility Moses will get to. It is a humility not frozen by self-deprecation or by fear of failure. Moses will get there, but he is not there yet. So, he refuses a fourth time in 4:13.

4. Moses’ fourth refusal and God’s burning anger (4:13-17)

But he said, “Please, Lord, now send *the* message by whomever You will.” “Whomever you will!” I mean really. That’s not what Moses means. He means, “Whoever you will besides me,” because God obviously wills that it be Moses. And finally, God is done being patient. Verse 14, “Then the anger of the LORD burned against Moses...”

God’s anger burns, but he does not even now give up on Moses. He tells him that Aaron who speaks fluently will partner with him. And I am not sure that God is a case of God giving in to Moses. God may have planned all along for Aaron to participate. He just first gave Moses the opportunity to trust, and then he was going to surprise him, saying, “Hey, and guess what? I am also sending Aaron with you.” We do not know what the plan would have been. Moses just could not get there by faith on his own. Sometimes our faith needs a push. We need a little heat to get us going in the right direction. So, God allowed his anger to burn. And that got Moses up off his seat. Moses acquiesces. He returns to Midian and asks his father-in-law Jethro, “Please let me go, that I may return to my brethren in Egypt.”

So, we come to our third section. We have seen the origin story. We have considered the call of Moses. Now we have got Moses setting out in 4:18-31.

III. Moses Sets Out (4:18-31)

And this brings us to a transitional moment in our whole narrative. Moses creates the transition in the narrative by giving us three different scenes. The first is going to be in Midian, then one on the way to Egypt, and then one in Egypt.

1. Death of the first-born (4:18-23)

So, while still in Midian God tells Moses how things are going to turn out in Egypt. This is 4:21-23.

²¹ The LORD said to Moses, “When you go back to Egypt see that you perform before Pharaoh all the wonders which I have put in your power; but I will harden his heart so that he will not let the people go. ²² Then you shall say to Pharaoh, ‘Thus says the LORD, “Israel is My son, My

firstborn.²³ So I said to you, 'Let My son go that he may serve Me'; but you have refused to let him go. Behold, I will kill your son, your firstborn." ' ' "

By this promise we are prepared for what is coming. God tells us that he intends to follow through with all 10 plagues. He will even harden Pharaoh's heart to get there. He also tells us why. God considers Israel his firstborn. Pharaoh has been throwing baby Israelites into the Nile river. Just as God saved one of those babies out, now he will save the rest of the nation out. And he is going to bring punishment on Egypt in the same kind as Egypt used to terrorized Israel. And we will take some time to think about God's sovereignty and justice in our next lesson. For now, Moses sobers us, revealing to us the seriousness of God in his anger at Egypt.

2. Protection in covenant (4:24-26)

This next story in verses 24-26 is sometimes called a seam in the narrative. I think that can be helpful term for us, though I want to distance myself from what documentary hypothesis scholars mean when they use it. I explained in my last lesson on ancient near eastern backgrounds that many scholars hold to the documentary hypothesis as a theory that these books of the Bible came from several different sources which were much later stitched together by a final editor. And this stitching together has left seams in the narrative. According to them, when we see an odd story that does not seem to fit, we can explain that oddity by assuming this is just what happens when an editor stitches together related stories by different authors.

That is the last thing I want to encourage you to do. It so misses the point. Quite the contrary, like with the story of Judah in the middle of the Joseph narrative, when we encounter something that seems to not fit, our minds should perk up and take notice. We should really start to think about those things. Because it is usually intentional by the author. So, rather than discounting the scene as foreign to the narrative, we should be asking, "Why did the author put this here?" He wants us to stop and pay attention. So that's what we should do with Exodus 4:24-26, is stop and think about what is going on.

²⁴ Now it came about at the lodging place on the way that the LORD met him and sought to put him to death. ²⁵ Then Zipporah took a flint and cut off her son's foreskin and threw it at Moses' feet, and she said, "You are indeed a bridegroom of blood to me." ²⁶ So He let him alone. At that time she said, "*You are* a bridegroom of blood"—because of the circumcision.

The debatable question with this passage is who the Lord is seeking to put to death. The Hebrew text reads, "sought to put *him* to death." So, if your Bible identifies the "him" as either Moses or the son of Moses, then it is helping you out with interpretation. They are both valid options, according to the grammar. But we are the ones who are left to decide which one is. Because we just have the pronoun him. So, is it Moses or is it his son? I am going to let you think about that. And I encourage you to consider what comes right before this and what comes right after this. What action does Zipporah take? What does that say about her? About Moses? About God?

That's why this text is here. It is to make us think. And so, I do like calling it a seam, not because it indicates the stitching together of the narrative by different authors but by the original author. He is bringing some things together. And this is a transition that is going to move us along. God has just declared the seriousness of his judgment on Egypt and with this story that seriousness becomes personal. The seriousness of God enters into the home of Moses. I think this is about the integrity of the leader. And after this we are going to continue on with our transitional journey to Egypt.

3. Initial reception by the Israelites (4:27-31)

So, Moses first meets Aaron at Mt. Sinai. I would love to hear more of that story. But we will have to ask Aaron when we meet him because the text does not tell us. It just tells us the brothers journey together back to Egypt and present God's plan to the elders, with Aaron speaking and Moses performing the miracles. And then we conclude with verse 31, "So the people believed; and when they heard that the LORD was concerned about the sons of Israel and that He had seen their affliction, then they bowed low and worshiped."

Moses had cause to rejoice. God had promised deliverance and the people have received that promise, and they have received Aaron and Moses as the spokesmen of God. Things are working. We are learning to be cautious, however, when the text says that people believe. We do not want to give too much or too little credence to that belief. Something is going on here. But it is about to be sorely tested. And the stories of Genesis have set us up to recognize that belief in the reality of God is not the same thing as the belief that submits in trust to the will of God. We have also come to see that even when a person has the later kind of belief, the kind that trusts and submits to the will of God, that belief is not the same thing as spiritual maturity. Faith that does not waver may still have a lot of room to grow. So, which kind of belief are these Israelites expressing and what kind of process is necessary to cause that belief to grow? We are going to have to wait and see where the story goes from here.

Conclusion

Few people in history will play a role in the kind of momentous events that Moses is about to enter into. This is the stuff of legend. And I do not mean unreal legend. I mean more than just real. It is the real kind of event that defines moments in human history. And because of how momentous this all is, it really is fantastic that we get such a personal, human view of Moses. His response to God at the moment of his call is so authentically real. We should not think, "I am no Moses. How could I ever learn from his story or compare myself to Moses?" To say that would be humorously ironic, because in saying those words you would be sounding very much like Moses. "Who am I? Who am I to do this?" That is exactly what he said. It is what we say. See, you are like Moses. And you can learn from him. You can model yourself after him.

So, let's consider these three questions inspired from his call. I am going to leave you with this. So, get in quiet place some time, now would be good, if you are already in a quiet place, or later, and ask God these three questions.

First, "God, what are you calling me to do? What are you calling me to do as a Christian that you call all your children to do? And what are you calling me to do as an individual, with my own personality and my set of relationships? What are you calling me to do?"

Second, "How are you preparing me God? What experiences and skills and gifts have you given me that can be used in your service? Help me consider myself soberly before you, acknowledging my strengths and my weaknesses? Help me recognize your ongoing work to develop me. Is my character where it needs to be? Am I humble? Do I have integrity? Please God, mold me. How are you preparing me God?"

Third, "Who are you God? Am I trusting too much in who I am? Am I fearful that I am not good enough? Is my focus primarily on me? Help me to grow in my knowledge of you? Help me believe that you are always with me and that that is the most important thing of all. Who are you God? Show me and help me to believe." What are you calling me to do? How are you preparing me? And who are you, who calls me and is with me?

Reflection Questions

1. What stands out to you as you look over the backstory in Genesis 1-2? Do you think that Moses' rash action in killing the Egyptian taskmaster was somehow motivated by who God was calling Moses to be? What stands out to you in the way God prepared Moses for his future calling?
2. What stands out to you as interesting or important or strange in Genesis 3-4 with the call of Moses?
3. How does the seam in Genesis 4:24-26 contribute to the transition from the call of Moses to the beginning of action in Egypt? Who do you think God sought to kill in 4:24? Why? What do you learn here about God, Moses and Zipporah?
4. What theological theme or truth might the burning bush be meant to symbolize? Any ideas?
5. Take some quiet time to reflect on the three questions inspired by the call of Moses. (a) What are you calling me to do God? (b) How have you prepared me God? (c) Who are you that calls me God?

Lesson 10: Exodus 5-18 God Redeems Israel

Introduction

Please excuse my voice today. I have got a bit of a cold. Last lesson at the start of the Exodus, I forgot to remind you about the Bible Project overview videos. The videos provide a creative, accurate look at each book of the Pentateuch firmly rooted in the text. You can access the videos at youtube, just search for "bible project Exodus." Or go to our observetheword.com site and click on Pentateuch resources. All the Bible project Pentateuch videos are posted there. They are only 5 or 6 minutes long and very worth watching.

We are covering Exodus 5-18 in this lesson, and we will consider our second monument of grace in the law of Moses. Monument of grace is my phrase for a passage of Scripture where God makes clear that Old Testament believers are not justified by law but through faith in God's atoning grace. If I were taking you on a tour of Zagreb, as we were passing a certain spot, I would stop and explain the significance of some statue or building or street, some monument. And that's the idea. As we pass by monuments of grace in the Pentateuch, I will be sure to point them out, so we do not miss their significance. There are more than 5 monuments of grace in the law of Moses. But I am going to concentrate on at least 5, so that we get one from each book of the Pentateuch which confirms the consistency of the message of grace throughout. So, I will let you know today when we get there.

We have two major divisions to our story in these chapters. First, God redeems Israel out of Egypt in 4:1-15:21. That story is going to end with our first major climax at the Red Sea. The second division in 15:22 through the end of chapter 18 covers the journey from Egypt to Mt. Sinai. And I am just going to on the significance of that journey in our conclusion in order to give most of our time to the major themes in the narrative of the rescue.

Moses initiates the confrontation Pharaoh (Exodus 5-6).

God gives Moses a lesson in leadership.

We start with the initial confrontation in 5 and 6. Moses has arrived in Egypt. He and Aaron have the backing of the Israelites. And now it is time to confront Pharaoh.

I imagine this part of the story as the struggle between the brick makers union and upper management. There is an oppressed work force, with Moses and Aaron appointed as the new union spokesmen. Pharaoh plays the role of the greedy executive. And I know this is anachronistic. It is not accurate. I am not suggesting it is. But there is this interesting back and forth between Pharaoh and Moses and the Israelites. And it is interesting that Pharaoh gives any of them a voice at all. I am just searching for some parallel to help me imagine what is going on here in chapter 5.

Remember that the elders of Israel and the people got excited by the miracles Moses could perform when he showed up after the burning bush incident. And they claimed to be on board. They have endorsed his mission. So, Moses goes, and he gets an audience with Pharaoh. Presumably this Pharaoh was the brother of the princess who raised Moses, so perhaps that is how Moses got in, through his connections. He is that weird bridge between the elite and the slaves. Moses' request of Pharaoh might surprise you. Pharaoh's response will not surprise you at all. So, let's read the first part of that encounter. This is 5:1-2.

¹ And afterward Moses and Aaron came and said to Pharaoh, "Thus says the LORD, the God of Israel, 'Let My people go that they may celebrate a feast to Me in the wilderness.' " ² But Pharaoh said, "Who is the LORD that I should obey His voice to let Israel go? I do not know the LORD, and besides, I will not let Israel go."

Well, that's what we expected from Pharaoh. He has a massive free labor force. He is not just going to be eager to let them out of his sight. The curious thing here is that Moses does not ask Pharaoh to let the people go free. He asks Pharaoh to let the people go worship Yahweh in the wilderness. And if we want to go the cynical route, we could charge Moses with lying here. He is being deceptive. I prefer to think that he is being careful and wise. He is confronting Pharaoh. And rather than come in

first with an outlandish request of freedom for the entire workforce, he asks for a concession. He asks for religious liberty and a week off.

Not only is it a lesser first request. He is just asking for a week, not complete freedom. The test is designed to test Pharaoh's heart. God makes this an issue between himself and Pharaoh. Will you grant Israel the right to go and worship me, according to how I require them to worship? Will you allow them to do honor to me?

Pharaoh rejects the request. So, when he does, he is setting himself in opposition not only to Israel, but to Yahweh. And as we might expect from the greedy upper management who has no compassion on his workforce, Pharaoh charges Moses and Aaron with trying to draw the workers away from their labor and goes with a punishment strategy. This is 5:7-9.

⁷ "You are no longer to give the people straw to make brick as previously; let them go and gather straw for themselves. ⁸ "But the quota of bricks which they were making previously, you shall impose on them; you are not to reduce any of it. Because they are lazy, therefore they cry out, 'Let us go and sacrifice to our God.' ⁹ "Let the labor be heavier on the men, and let them work at it so that they will pay no attention to false words."

The charge sounds like Ebenezer Scrooge. You want a week off. You are just lazy. You are just trying to get out of work. So, here you go. Work more. This is an attempt to turn the work force against Aaron and Moses, so that the people "will pay no attention to [their] false words."

The tactic has some success. The laborers complain to their Jewish foremen at the impossibility of the work load. The Jewish foremen then complain to Pharaoh, who only chastises them for their laziness and reinforces his command of no straw, more bricks. And just as Pharaoh planned, the Jewish foremen then accost Aaron and Moses, saying in verse 21, "May the LORD look upon you and judge *you*, for you have made us odious in Pharaoh's sight and in the sight of his servants, to put a sword in their hand to kill us." Pharaoh turned the Jewish laborers against their chosen spokesmen, which had the desired effect of draining the will from Moses. So, how he is overwhelmed and doubtful and without hope and defeated. So, Moses pours out his fears to God, verses 22-23.

²² Then Moses returned to the LORD and said, "O Lord, why have You brought harm to this people? Why did You ever send me? ²³ "Ever since I came to Pharaoh to speak in Your name, he has done harm to this people, and You have not delivered Your people at all."

You get the sense that Moses and the people expected immediate deliverance. They are not prepared for a long fight. I think we have here a classic tactic in how to break a movement. Put heat on the followers, so they will turn on and dishearten their leaders. This is a timeless illustration of how Satan opposes plans God gives his people by demoralizing the followers, and so, unnerving the leaders. The leader comes with a vision. The people love the vision. "We believe! This is great!" But who has counted the cost? Who is ready for the opposition, the long struggle, the sacrifice? Isn't it normal to often get knocked back before we are going to be able to really move ahead? Whose ready for that? Moses has a double burden. The people he is leading do not believe in him anymore. He is trying to lead a people who have lost trust. We also see that Moses really does care for the Israelites. So, his burden is not just on how they see him, but their suffering hurts him. He feels deeply the pain that his vision and his action have brought onto his people. He feels responsible. And while it is certainly commendable that Moses cares deeply for his people, he has forgotten a truth that spiritual leaders need to keep taped to their bathroom mirror. This is not your vision. This is not your people. Moses is taking more responsibility than is his due. He needs to remember who called him to this task. He also needs to remember the difficult truth that a right vision for a noble task often requires inviting others into struggle and pain. Leaders call others to sacrifice.

God does not chastise Moses for his weaknesses, which reminds me of our lesson on Abraham in Genesis 15 when he asked God, "How will I have descendants if I cannot have children?" God sees the heart when we struggle with the vision. He saw Abraham's heart and gave him encouragement.

He sees Moses' heart and is going to give him encouragement, as well. God reminds Moses that the vision is God's vision and the people are God's people. This great commission given to Moses is anchored in a promise that God made 400 years before in covenant with Abraham. This is not all about Moses. This is about God. And God says in 6:3-6,

"I am the LORD;³ and I appeared to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, as God Almighty [and by my name Yahweh, did I not make myself known to them?⁴] ⁴ I also established My covenant with them, to give them the land of Canaan, the land in which they sojourned. ⁵ Furthermore I have heard the groaning of the sons of Israel, because the Egyptians are holding them in bondage, and I have remembered My covenant. ⁶ "Say, therefore, to the sons of Israel, 'I am the LORD, and I will bring you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians, and I will deliver you from their bondage. I will also redeem you with an outstretched arm and with great judgments. ⁷ Then I will take you for My people, and I will be your God; and you shall know that I am the LORD your God, who brought you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians."

God reminds Moses that he is playing a role in a much larger story that God is still in the process of writing. Moses can lay the burden of the people in the hands of God. And Moses can trust that God is going to bring Israel out of Egypt.

The theme of knowing God is introduced.

Moses trust in God depends on his personal knowledge of God. I'd like to turn now to that theme as one of the main themes of Exodus. The theme of knowing God.

There is an important phrase in verse 3 which brings out the theme but also introduces an interpretation challenge. Your Bible probably translates verse 3 something like this, "and I appeared to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, as God Almighty, but *by* My name, LORD, I did not make Myself known to them." The implication of that translation is that God did not reveal himself by the name Yahweh to the patriarchs in Genesis. Instead the revelation of this name Yahweh or "I am who I am" came new to Moses at the burning bush. And since the name Yahweh first appears in the written text way back in Genesis 2, we have to assume that Moses went back and used the name Yahweh in his writing, even though it was not a name that had been revealed at that time, sort of like going back to Isaiah 53 and writing in the name Jesus when we see the suffering servant.

Hebrew scholars like Douglas Stuart point out a second option for interpreting the text. We could read it this way, "I am the LORD;³ and I appeared to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, as God Almighty [and by my name Yahweh, did I not make myself known to them?]" The debate of translation comes from the possibility that certain statements in Hebrew can be translated as questions, even if those statements do not have the interrogatory particle that would normally indicate it is a question. In English we can turn a statement into a question by raising our voice at the end of sentence. "I did not make myself known to them?" There is a raised tone at the end. That makes it a question. It is the same as "Did I not make myself known to them?", which has a question word at the beginning and also a raised tone at the end. Stuart refers to Numbers 23:19; 2 Samuel 23:5; 2 Kings 5:26; Jeremiah 18:6; Jonah 4:11; Job 11:11; 30:25, all as examples where the Hebrew question particle is not used, but the sentence is translated as a question. It is an understood question. So, to give just one example in Numbers 23:19, states, "God is not a man, that He should lie, Nor a son of man, that He should repent; Has He said, and will He not do it? Or has He spoken, and will He not make it good?"

⁴ "The most likely translation of 6:3 is not that of the NIV ("but by my name the LORD I did not make myself known to them") but rather a question, "and by my name Yahweh, did I not make myself known to them?" In Hb. interrogatives are only sometimes marked by the so-called interrogative particle. The construction used here is common enough for interrogatives beginning with "is it not" or "did he not" or the like that require a positive answer ("is it not the case that x is y?" interrogatives)." Stuart, D. K. (2006). Exodus, New American Commentary Series Vol. 2. Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers.

Taking Exodus 6:3 as a question, “but by my name Yahweh, did I not make myself known to them?”, ties into the theme of knowing God, which is carried through Exodus. It has been said that the most important thing about you is how you answer the question, “Who is God?” We cannot live life the way life is meant to be lived without knowing how to answer that question rightly. Like Moses in Exodus 3, we think the primary question is, “Who am I?” We are very hung up on our own identity. When in reality, the central question to life is, “Who are you O Lord?” We can only come to understand our identity by understanding our identity in relation to God. We need the knowledge of God to understand who we are. That is the primary question, “Who is God?” So, how do you answer that question? God is teaching Moses here that we answer that question according to how God has revealed himself. “Do you want to know me? I am the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. I am the God who has revealed himself in history.”

Backtracking to Moses’ first interview in front of Pharaoh at the beginning of chapter 5, remember that Moses made the issue one of honoring “Yahweh, the God of Israel.” And remember how Pharaoh responded, “Who is Yahweh that I should obey his voice to let Israel go? I do not **know** Yahweh, and besides, I will not let Israel go?” Pharaoh claims no knowledge of Yahweh. And he rejects any desire to have any knowledge of Yahweh. While Moses is called to trust in his knowledge of Yahweh.

God tells Moses here in chapter 6, “I will also redeem you with an outstretched arm and with great judgments. ⁷ Then I will take you for My people, and I will be your God; and you shall **know** that I am the LORD your God, who brought you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians.” Not only does God plan to redeem Israel from Egypt, but he plans to do it in a way that communicates who he is, “You shall know that I am Yahweh, your God.” And that phrase, “you shall know that I am Yahweh,” occurs 11 times, from this, the first one in chapter 6, through chapter 14, 11 times. It is not a common phrase in the Old Testament, so we should be especially alerted to its repetition here. This is a theme of this narrative, that you shall know that I am Yahweh. Pharaoh may claim at the beginning to not know God. Not to worry. God is about to make himself known.

God demolishes the Gods of Egypt (Exodus 12-15a).

Knowledge of God in Exodus is also connected to the theme of spiritual warfare. Last night, reading a book called *Babylon: Mesopotamia and the Birth of Civilization*, the author reminded me of something my Old Testament professor had taught me. Writing about the Sumerian hundred year’s war he observed, “the conflict between Lagash and Umma was a conflict between the god Ningirsu of Lagash and the god Shara of Umma. Men fought and died and cities were destroyed, but the actual argument was between the gods (Kriwaczek, 89).” The ancients believed the real battle was taking place in the realm of the gods. And this ancient near eastern worldview is not that far off the true biblical worldview. War amongst men mirrors spiritual activity. Habakkuk’s revelation of faith, in chapter 3 of Habakkuk, comes when he finally realizes that the Babylonians are not merely human invaders but instruments of God’s wrath. It is God who is going to war against Judah. In Daniel, Daniel is told by an angel that he was delayed because of opposition from demonic powers called the prince of the kingdom of Persia and the prince of Greece (Daniel 10:13, 20). This idea is also present in Exodus. In Exodus 12:12, God tells Moses, “I will go through the land of Egypt on that night, and will strike down all the firstborn in the land of Egypt, both man and beast; and against all the gods of Egypt I will execute judgments—I am the LORD.” Moses restates this idea in Numbers 33:4, writing, “while the Egyptians were burying all their firstborn whom the LORD had struck down among them. The LORD had also executed judgments on their gods.”

The biblical worldview understands “the gods” of other peoples as false belief systems, so their idols are empty, but also as demonic spirits. God does not do battle with equal, evil powers. There is no equal. God is the only “I Am.” Everything else is created, including angels and demons. As such, the outcome is never in question. Evil exists only as God permits created beings to continue to exert their own wills, whether human or demonic. When God chooses to act, the end is sure. Against Egypt, God has chosen to act. He is doing battle not only against Pharaoh and his army but against false strongholds of belief and the demonic powers behind them.

And though in the text Moses does not implicitly connect the plagues to the gods and goddesses of Egypt, the comment that God went to war against the gods of Egypt, makes it really hard to ignore some obvious connections. Isis, goddess of the Nile, floods the land every year by her tears for Osiris. In the first plague, God turns the Nile to blood. Heqet the Egyptian goddess of fertility was represented as a frog. The second plague floods the land with frogs. The third plague of gnats and fourth plague of flies are hard to connect. Maybe we should think of Set, the god of the desert and storms and Uatchit the goddess of the Sun's burning heat and the Nile's marshes. The death of cattle in the fifth plague seems more directly a dig at Hathor, the sky goddess often depicted as a cow. Sekhmet, the goddess of healing, was unable to stop the sixth plague of boils. The sky goddess Nut was unable to control the hail, thunder, and lightening of the seventh plague. And where was Osiris, the god of life, death and crops along the Nile, when the locusts of the eighth plague devoured those crops? The sun god Ra was blacked out during the ninth plague. And then with the final plague, Pharaoh's claim to divinity comes under attack. When Pharaoh's father died, he claimed to become the god Horus, son of Isis and Osiris. Taking the throne, his son the new Pharaoh became the incarnation or image of Horus on earth. Striking down the son of Pharaoh in the tenth plague, God strikes down Horus.

In this epic power confrontation God reveals himself while, at the same time, unmasking the false gods of Egypt. Will Pharaoh now know God? Well, that brings us to another theme of the narrative, the power struggle in a man's heart. With Pharaoh the text leads us to wonder, could he ever have come to know God?

God hardens Pharaoh's already hard heart.

On his way to Egypt after receiving the call, God told Moses, "I will harden [Pharaoh's] heart so that he will not let the people go (4:21)." Three different Hebrew verbs are used on 20 different occasions from chapter 4 to 14 in reference to the hardening of Pharaoh's heart. Does this mean that God worked both to reveal knowledge of himself to Pharaoh and, at the same time, prevented Pharaoh from yielding to that knowledge? Did God actively prevent Pharaoh from saving faith?

There are different ways to understand the work of God on Pharaoh. I will give you my thoughts as one option. Eleven of the twenty references to the hardening of Pharaoh's heart name God as the subject. God is the one working to make his heart hard, impenetrable. Another six times Pharaoh's heart is the subject. So, as in 7:14, "Pharaoh's heart is hard; he refuses to let the people go." These references could indicate the state of Pharaoh's heart apart from God's action or could assume the hardness is a result of God's action. But then four occurrences, in 8:15, 32; 9:34, and 13:15, have Pharaoh as the one who hardens his own heart.

So, I ask myself this question. What would it mean for Pharaoh's heart to soften? Well, since the references to the hardening of heart all have to do with whether or not to let Israel go, softening of the heart in these instances would result in a giving in to the command of God. That is not the same thing as trust in God. To give up, to admit defeat, to let Israel go, that is one thing. To bow down, to yield the heart, to worship. That is a whole other story. Pharaoh gives us a picture of a human being vacillating, not between faith and rebellion, but between giving in and not giving in. Moshe Greenberg describes Pharaoh this way, "The opposition of Pharaoh is the archetypal opposition of human power, of human authority to the claims of God. Under pressure it will show flexibility and accommodation, even reversing itself – first by crying for help, then by confessing guilt and making concessions. But after all its retreats, it clings to its last redoubt, a core of self-assertiveness and independence, to surrender which would mean the end of its claim to ultimate, self-sufficient power. Here it resists, careless of the cost, unto death."⁵ Left to himself, there is no reason given anywhere in the text to expect that Pharaoh would turn in faith to God, ever. God did not need to harden Pharaoh to make him resistant to submission. Pharaoh was always going to resist to submission.

What was God's purpose in hardening the heart of Pharaoh? Was God out to damn a man who left on his own would repent and believe? No. In Exodus 9:16, God says, "For this very purpose I raised

⁵ Hamilton, V. P. (2005). Handbook on the Pentateuch. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic.

you up, to demonstrate my power in you, and that my name might be proclaimed throughout the whole earth.” Pharaoh is not a neutral being. Pharaoh is a sinful, fallen being, who believes that he is a god. He starts this tale with a hard heart, reflected by his very first words to Moses, “Who is Yahweh, that I should obey his voice?” By his own free will Pharaoh hardens his heart against God. In fact, we are not told that God hardens Pharaoh’s heart until 9:34-35, well into the sixth plague, where we are given both sides of the same coin at once. Verse 34 says, [Pharaoh] sinned again and hardened his heart.” Right after which verse 35 says, “And Pharaoh’s heart was hardened.”

I believe that the hardening of the heart of Pharaoh by God was a strengthening of an evil will to continue on in fixed rebellion. God strengthened Pharaoh according to an already wicked and resistant heart. God gave him the fortitude to carry out his stubborn will to the end of the tenth plague. God would not allow his opponent to bow out. He declared that Pharaoh would see this through, so that the spiritual, religious, and intellectual strongholds of one of the world’s human superpowers might be unmasked and the true glory of God made known for the salvation of all who would turn from the false powers and the false gods to the worship of the one true God.

The text makes clear God’s plan to spread the knowledge of his glory, power, and goodness. Let’s read some of those texts.

First, God intended his saving action as a testimony to the Israelites.

Exodus 10:1–2

¹ Then the LORD said to Moses, “Go to Pharaoh, for I have hardened his heart and the heart of his servants, that I may perform these signs of Mine among them, ² and that you may tell in the hearing of your son, and of your grandson, how I made a mockery of the Egyptians and how I performed My signs among them, that you may know that I am the LORD.”

Exodus 14:31

³¹ When Israel saw the great power which the LORD had used against the Egyptians, the people feared the LORD, and they believed in the LORD and in His servant Moses.

Second, God also planned his saving action as a testimony to the Egyptians.

Exodus 7:3–5

³ “But I will harden Pharaoh’s heart that I may multiply My signs and My wonders in the land of Egypt. ⁴ When Pharaoh does not listen to you, then I will lay My hand on Egypt and bring out My hosts, My people the sons of Israel, from the land of Egypt by great judgments. ⁵ The Egyptians shall know that I am the LORD, when I stretch out My hand on Egypt and bring out the sons of Israel from their midst.”

Exodus 9:20–21

²⁰ The one among the servants of Pharaoh who feared the word of the LORD made his servants and his livestock flee into the houses; ²¹ but he who paid no regard to the word of the LORD left his servants and his livestock in the field.

Exodus 14:4

⁴ “Thus I will harden Pharaoh’s heart, and he will chase after them; and I will be honored through Pharaoh and all his army, and the Egyptians will know that I am the LORD.”

Third, And God planned his saving action as a testimony to the peoples of Canaan.

Exodus 15:14–15

¹⁴ The peoples have heard, they tremble; Anguish has gripped the inhabitants of Philistia. ¹⁵ Then the chiefs of Edom were dismayed; The leaders of Moab, trembling grips them; All the inhabitants of Canaan have melted away.

Exodus 18:11

¹¹ “Now I know that the LORD is greater than all the gods; indeed, it was proven when they dealt proudly against the people.”

Joshua 2:9–11

⁹ [Rehab] said to the men, “I know that the LORD has given you the land, and that the terror of you has fallen on us, and that all the inhabitants of the land have melted away before you. ¹⁰ For we have heard how the LORD dried up the water of the Red Sea before you when you came out of Egypt, and what you did to the two kings of the Amorites who were beyond the Jordan, to Sihon and Og, whom you utterly destroyed. ¹¹ When we heard *it*, our hearts melted and no courage remained in any man any longer because of you; for the LORD your God, He is God in heaven above and on earth beneath.

What has God revealed? What has God made known? God hardened Pharaoh to bring out the madness of human defiance, even to the devastation of his nation, even to the death of his son, even to the destruction of his army. I am reminded of Psalm 2:2, “The kings of the earth take their stand, and the rulers take counsel together against the Lord and against his anointed.” Pharaoh gives us an ugly glimpse into the heart of every man, magnified by his high position of power and influence. This is man shaking his fist at God, crying out, “I will be captain of my own soul though I lead myself and everyone around me to destruction. I will not yield to truth and goodness. I claim my right to be my own god.” Strengthening Pharaoh reveals to us something about the rebellion of the human heart.

At the same time, we come to greater knowledge of God, of his power and the inevitability of his victory over evil. God is truly God. There is no other. God makes himself knowable and invites all men to know him. This is what we just read in these passages. One of God’s purposes for engaging the false beliefs systems and fake gods of this mighty human empire is to shake people loose from their bondage, that they might turn and know God. This is not only for Israel but also that Egypt might know God. And not only for the Egyptians, the gift of knowledge is also for the peoples of Canaan, that like Rahab, some might yield to the knowledge of the Lord and confess with in their hearts, “the LORD your God, He is God in heaven above and on earth beneath.” The liberation of Israel from Egypt involved a vast display of the might of God, containing power to wake men and women to the knowledge of him.

In the tenth plague of Egypt, God reveals something even more about himself, something beyond his might and power. In the midst of his judgments, God gives the Israelites a redemptive analogy to help them understand his mercy and grace.

God establishes the Passover as an ongoing monument of grace.



This liberation of Israel came at a cost to God that no one then expected or even could have imagined. He keeps the knowledge of his own sacrifice to himself.

The last plague, the death of the firstborn, is an example of what some scholars call intrusion ethics, when the just judgment of God intrudes into the usual course of human events. Romans 3:23 tells us, “All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” Soon after, Romans 6:23 tells us, “The wages of sin is death.”

Paul is only affirming the curse God proclaimed on Adam and Eve, “In the day you eat from it you shall surely die.” Sinful man cannot live in the presence of a holy God. The result of sin must be eternal death, eternal separation from God. This is the just judgment that already hangs over the head of every human being. As John wrote in 3:17-18, “God did not send the Son into the world to judge the world but that the world should be saved through him...he who does not believe has been judged already.” Jesus did not come to judge because the judgment had already been established.

God typically allows human beings to live out their lives, usually meeting their end through old age or sickness or accident or human evil. And then, after death, the judgment for sin is carried out. Intrusion ethics points out that God would have been just and faithful to his word if he had demanded the lives of Adam and Eve immediately. It is God’s right at any point to allow his justice to intrude into the world and demand the punishment of death for the sin of any human being. This is what happened at the flood. This is what happened to Ananias and Saphira. This is what happened in each of those rare instances when God chose to forego his patient mercy to bring forward an

immediate execution of justice. When God takes the life of every first born of Egypt, he is not taking innocent life. He is not acting unjustly. The Israelites has suffered unjustly for years under wicked Egyptian oppression. The payment for sin is due.

But it would be wrong to think that the Israelites do not owe that payment themselves. God has not chosen Israel out because they are more righteous than the Egyptians. God can liberate the Israelites from Egypt. But for God to make them fit to be his own, the penalty of sin demanded by God's own justice must be paid. The Passover ritual confirms that truth. This is the Monument of grace that I want to point out to you in the book of Exodus. So, here it is, Exodus 12:6-13.

⁶ 'You shall keep [a lamb] until the fourteenth day of the same month, then the whole assembly of the congregation of Israel is to kill it at twilight. ⁷ 'Moreover, they shall take some of the blood and put it on the two doorposts and on the lintel of the houses in which they eat it. ⁸ 'They shall eat the flesh that *same* night, roasted with fire, and they shall eat it with unleavened bread and bitter herbs. ⁹ 'Do not eat any of it raw or boiled at all with water, but rather roasted with fire, *both* its head and its legs along with its entrails. ¹⁰ 'And you shall not leave any of it over until morning, but whatever is left of it until morning, you shall burn with fire. ¹¹ 'Now you shall eat it in this manner: *with* your loins girded, your sandals on your feet, and your staff in your hand; and you shall eat it in haste—it is the LORD's Passover. ¹² 'For I will go through the land of Egypt on that night, and will strike down all the firstborn in the land of Egypt, both man and beast; and against all the gods of Egypt I will execute judgments—I am the LORD. ¹³ 'The blood shall be a sign for you on the houses where you live; and when I see the blood I will pass over you, and no plague will befall you to destroy *you* when I strike the land of Egypt.

The redemption of Israel will cost God the death of his Son. John the Baptist understood this when he saw Jesus coming and cried out, "Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world (John 1:29)!" Jesus would be the true Passover lamb. The Israelites did not understand this. They only knew to obey in faith, that if they put the blood of the lamb on the doorposts of their house, then the angel of death would pass over. The Israelites sons were not more righteous. They too deserved the judgement of the angel of wrath for their own sin. But by faith they could place themselves under the blood of the lamb. That blood did not take away sin. It was a pledge by God that he would one day make the necessary payment. And he did. The redemption of Israel out of Egypt is based not only on the spiritual power of God but also on his grace and his mercy that would one day be realized on the cross.

The Exodus is achieved.

After this final plague, the Egyptians urge the Israelites to leave. And so, they do. On the way out, they plunder the Egyptians as a victorious army would, requesting and receiving gold, silver, and articles of clothing (12:35-36). 13:18 tells us that "God led the people around by the way of the wilderness to the Red Sea; and the sons of Israel went up in martial array from the land of Egypt." They marched out like an army, but in this last act of following God, Moses seems to have made a terrible mistake. Instead of taking the coast road up to Israel, he chose to head out into the wilderness towards Mt. Sinai. And the consequences are potentially devastating.

Moses leads the people into a dead end with their backs up against the Red Sea. Before he realizes the danger, Pharaoh hardens his heart, changes his mind, and musters his army. The chariot battalion of one of the mightiest military forces on the face of the earth gallops into view. The Israelites have nowhere to go. They are stuck. They had been marching like an army but that was just pretend. They are slaves. They cannot face Egypt. How quickly our hearts fail us, even so soon after experiencing the miracles of God? So, they turn on Moses in 14:11, "Is it because there were no graves in Egypt that you have taken us away to die in the wilderness?...Is this not the word that we spoke to you in Egypt, saying 'Leave us alone that we may serve the Egyptians?'" They turn on their leader. But Moses had not forgotten what the Lord had just done. He turns to the people and cries out with bold faith,

¹³ ...“Do not fear! Stand by and see the salvation of the LORD which He will accomplish for you today; for the Egyptians whom you have seen today, you will never see them again forever. ¹⁴ The LORD will fight for you while you keep silent.”

And so, God did. He fought for them. He opened the Red Sea and took them through, just as he had taken Noah through the waters of the flood. Then he brought the waves down on the Egyptians, obliterating their army. In the years of wandering there would be no threat at their backs from the Egyptians. That danger of that army has been taken care of.

Conclusion: The Israelites begin the process of discipleship (15b-18).

God has redeemed Israel out of Egypt. The above passage used the word salvation for the first time in Exodus. “Stand by and see the salvation of Yahweh...Yahweh will fight for you while you keep silent.” I am again reminded of Genesis 15 when God cut covenant with Abraham. God walked through the covenant pieces taking the curse upon himself while Abraham slept passively to the side. Here Israel is to stand passively to the side silently, watching. They have no hand in their own salvation. That is a consistent theme through Scripture. Acceptance before God comes by grace through faith alone in the atoning salvation of God.

What is the human response to God’s grace? That is chapter 15, the hymn of Moses, which starts,

¹ ...I will sing to the LORD, for He is highly exalted; The horse and its rider He has hurled into the sea.

² “The LORD is my strength and song, And He has become my salvation;

This is my God, and I will praise Him; My father’s God, and I will extol Him.

The right human response to God is worship that comes out of a grateful and awe-inspired heart. God enjoys song, though he does not want only song. He wants the worship of life. He wants the Israelites to walk in faith and present themselves to him. Our salvation, in terms of justification is 100% dependent on God. But God does not want flabby, whining, spoiled, stunted children who never grow. God saves us not to keep us as we are but to see us transformed. We see God’s desire for the Israelites come out in the next three chapters 16-18. Up to this point God has asked nothing from the Israelites. Now he expects them to participate in the journey. This is the way of discipleship. God saves and then invites us to participate in our transformation and growth. The Israelites now given tests of faith. They have to trust God for food and water. They have to start participating in battle to fight for themselves. They have to begin to organize themselves.

We have a great king and a newly formed people. The right question Israel should be asking now is, “How then shall we live in relationship with our savior King?” They need a covenant. And that is where we are going in our next lesson, to Mt. Sinai.

Reflection Questions

1. When you read through chapter 5, what stands out to you in the interactions between Pharaoh, Moses, and the Jewish foremen? What had you not noticed before? What is going on in each one’s heart and mind?
2. Observe 6:28-7:7. What stands out to you as interesting or important or confusing in these verses?
3. How does 6:28-7:7 connect to:
 - a. Moses’ despair and God’s encouragement in 5:22-6:10?
 - b. The theme of knowing God?
 - c. The theme of the hardening of Pharaoh’s heart?
4. How do you understand the interplay between the state of Pharaoh’s already hard heart (ie. 7:13-14), Pharaoh hardening his own heart (ie. 8:14, 32), and God actively hardening Pharaoh’s heart (ie. 9:35)?
5. What are potential spiritual strongholds of false belief in your culture, ideas that people hold on to despite the destructive consequence?
6. How does the Passover illustrate the grace of God? What 3 to 5 points would you emphasize in explaining to someone how the Passover stands as a monument of God’s grace?

Lesson 11: Exodus 19-24 God Cuts Covenant with Israel

Introduction

When God appeared to Moses at the burning bush, he told Moses, “this shall be the sign to you that it is I who have sent you: when you have brought the people out of Egypt you shall worship God at this mountain (3:12).” This seems to me a special sign just for Moses. He met God at this place. And God said, “You will meet me again at this place.” So, arriving again at Mount Sinai, Moses must have remembered God said this. I like to imagine what he might have thought, “Lord God. You worked it out exactly as you said you would work it out. You truly reign over the lives of men. Here I am back at Sinai at the exact spot where I told you four times, ‘Please send someone else.’ And you did not strike me down. You did not give up on me. You did get a bit angry at me. And I am glad, or I never would have gone back to Egypt. Even there, I was ready to give it all up when Pharaoh refused my request and put the people to harsher labor, beating them, making the work impossible. I was ready to give in then. What did I say? I remember. I said, ‘Why did you ever send me? Ever since I came to Pharaoh to speak in your name, he has done harm to the people; and you have not delivered your people at all (5:23-24).’ Again, you did not give up on me. You encouraged me. Reminding me that this was a promise made long ago to Abraham. This is about your vision and these are your people. Still, I was afraid, and I said again, ‘Behold, I am unskilled in speech; how then will Pharaoh listen to me (6:30)!’ But you gave strength to my heart, and you gave me a voice through Aaron, and look where we are now! Look at the people. At the mountain last time it was just me and my sheep. There is an entire nation out here now. And here we are just as you said. Who could believe it?”

I am sure Moses would have said it better than that and had deeper thoughts than that. He is so interesting to think about as the reluctant leader. The one who believed he had nothing worth saying, and he did not know how to say it anyway. The one no one would follow; now be standing at Mt. Sinai with thousands and thousands of Israelites, men, women, and children, set free and going home.

Moses is becoming the leader that God is making him to be. Here at Sinai he will take up the role of covenant mediator. He will be the go between, the one trusted by the great king to speak on his behalf and trusted by the people to speak on their behalf. God is ready to cut covenant, to establish a legal foundation for this new nation. Remember in our kingdom motif that we need a king, a people, a covenant, a mediator, a land, and a temple. That’s what we need to have kingdom. We have the king and the people. In Exodus 19-24, we are going to get a covenant communicated through a mediator. I am going to give special attention to the work of Moses as a mediator in chapter 19. Then an overview of chapters 20-23 will help us see the covenant form. And in chapter 24 we will consider the actual cutting of the covenant.

We start in chapter 19 where we see what it looks like to be a covenant mediator.

Covenant mediator (19)

Moses on the mountain, receiving the Ten Commandments is another one of those sections of Scripture that because I felt very familiar with through Sunday School stories and sermon references and movie depictions, I was surprised going through it myself by some of the details I did not remember or never noticed before. For example, how many times would you say that Moses went up on the mountain to speak to God? Once, twice, three times? It’s going to be five times in this section, 19-24, and another two times in chapters 33 and 34. We really see Moses playing a mediator role, going back and forth between God and the people. Scholars will say that a mediator was typical in the Ancient Near East when making a suzerain-vassal treaty. The suzerain or great king did not communicate directly to the vassal people. He appointed a spokesman on his behalf as a go between. He appointed a covenant mediator. Using biblical language, we could also call him a prophet, a covenant mediator prophet. And there are just a few of those in Scripture. They are not calling people back to covenant faithfulness of an already existing covenant. They are helping

mediate something new. So far, we have had Adam and Noah and Abraham performing this role, now Moses. Enacting the role of covenant mediator, Moses goes back and forth between God and the people three times in just chapter 19. Let's start with Exodus 19:3-6.

First mediation between God and the people

³ Moses went up to God, and the LORD called to him from the mountain, saying, "Thus you shall say to the house of Jacob and tell the sons of Israel: ⁴ 'You yourselves have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and *how* I bore you on eagles' wings, and brought you to Myself. ⁵ Now then, if you will indeed obey My voice and keep My covenant, then you shall be My own possession among all the 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 sons of Israel."

Moses received these words from God for the people. This is the initial charge for Israel. Having experienced redemption from Egypt, as God says, "I bore you on eagles' wings, and brought you to Myself," Israel is now invited into covenant relationship with a purpose. Exodus 19:6 is a key verse for Exodus. God is saying this is my purpose. This is why I brought you out to be a nation. This is why I am forming you. This is why I am bringing you into covenant relationship. This is your identity. This is your great commission. "You shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation."

We understand what it means to be a nation of priests based on what God said right before that, "you shall be My own possession among all the peoples, for all the earth is Mine." The Ancient Near East placed gods in particular localities, lesser gods over towns and villages, greater gods over the capitals of nations or city states. Gods were attached to the cities where they resided in their temples. The Egyptians had their gods, and the Babylonians had their gods, and the Canaanites had their gods, the Hittites had their gods. God makes the claim that the whole earth and all peoples are his. By choosing out Israel, he is in no way to be seen as making himself a local god. And that is going to be a danger for Israel. And it is certainly the way other peoples see Yahweh. They see him as the god of Israel, meaning that he is just the god over that location. But as God's scope is global, so Israel's scope needs to be global. They are supposed to see their entire nation as a kingdom of priests. They will have in their nation a formal priesthood. Still, every Israelite should see himself or herself as a priest of Yahweh.

The global scope of all peoples is a normal theme of God's covenant commissions. He told Adam and Eve, "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth (Genesis 1:28)." He told Abraham, "And in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed (Genesis 12:3)." Much later he told the disciples of Jesus, "Go and make disciples of all nations (Matthew 28:19)." The scope is global, and the people of God are his priests to all peoples.

What is the role of a priest? A priest worships his God and helps others enter into that worship, also. The role of a priest is to know God and make God known, making God known through words and through manner of life. The priest models the character of God in his own life and shares the knowledge of God with others. Adam and Eve were to be the image of God to the world, created in his image. That lived out character is essential to God's commission here. He says, "Obey my voice and keep my covenant." Every shepherd, every shopkeeper, every baker, every teacher, every homemaker, every vinedresser is to obey the voice of the Lord and to keep his commandments and so, image him in their everyday life. As a good priest, they are to develop their own relationship with God through prayer and the knowledge of his word and the fulfillment of his commands, and so also help others come into the same kind of relationship with God. They are to be a priesthood of all believers. Many things are new with the new covenant. This concept is not one of them. Just as God sees every member of the church, the body of Jesus Christ, as a priest who seeks to know God, live for God, and make him known. So also, the Israelites were supposed to be a kingdom of priests, a holy nation to make God known. That is their commission. That is Exodus 19:6.

Moses then goes from God to the people in verses 7-8a. "So Moses came and called the elders of the people, and set before them all these words which the LORD had commanded him. All the people answered together and said, 'All that the LORD has spoken we will do!'"

The people give an initial commitment to covenant. They show an eagerness to enter into formal relationship with God, though they have surely not yet counted the costs or considered their own ability to keep the covenant. Which, of course, is normal. When we get caught up in the emotion of the experience, we are ready to commit to anything. And this was some experience they were having. You can imagine. So, we are not surprised that initially they say, "We will obey! We will do it all!"

Verse 8b tells us, "Moses brought back the words of the people to the LORD." And of course, God does not need Moses to tell him what the people said, because God heard it when they said it. But God has instructed Moses to fulfill the role of the mediator and that is what he is doing. He went from God to the people, and now he is going from the people back to God. And this completes our first back and forth. Now we consider the second. This is in 9-14.

Second mediation between God and the people

⁹ The LORD said to Moses, "Behold, I will come to you in a thick cloud, so that the people may hear when I speak with you and may also believe in you forever." Then Moses told the words of the people to the LORD. ¹⁰ The LORD also said to Moses, "Go to the people and consecrate them today and tomorrow, and let them wash their garments; ¹¹ and let them be ready for the third day, for on the third day the LORD will come down on Mount Sinai in the sight of all the people. ¹² You shall set bounds for the people all around, saying, 'Beware that you do not go up on the mountain or touch the border of it; whoever touches the mountain shall surely be put to death. ¹³ No hand shall touch him, but he shall surely be stoned or shot through; whether beast or man, he shall not live.' When the ram's horn sounds a long blast, they shall come up to the mountain." ¹⁴ So Moses went down from the mountain to the people and consecrated the people, and they washed their garments.

God intends to make a great impression on the people of Israel to confirm his word spoken through Moses, "I will come to you in a thick cloud, so that the people may hear when I speak with you and may also believe in you forever." Here is another one of those details we might miss because we have heard this story retold so many times. How do the people of Israel first receive the Ten Commandments? Most people would say on stone tablets. And that is not what is going to happen. The stone tablets come quite a bit later. Moses is not going to bring those down off the mountain until chapter 32. First, God is going to speak the Ten Commandments. As he says here, he will come "in a thick cloud" and speak the word of his commands to impress on the Israelites that these words are coming not from Moses but from God. This is a reality we all need to experience. We need to come to God and experience his words for ourselves. He uses teachers and prophets and preachers, and this is good. But there is something missing when we cannot say for ourselves that I have read for myself, I have heard for myself, I see the word of the Lord, and I know it is from God. God decided at this moment to impress this truth on the whole nation. These are not merely the words of Moses. These are my words, the words of Yahweh.

God will reveal his glory to some degree, only partially and, yet still dangerously. We could say that the burning bush was a man-sized revelation of the glory of God. When Moses stepped up to that bush, he was instructed to take off his sandals because he walked on holy ground. For the nation of Israel God is going to light up a whole mountain in fire and smoke in a nation-sized revelation of his glory. The ground is also holy. God is holy and just and good, and his holiness is like the fire of the sun. It will burn up all that which is unholy. Israel is invited to draw near but not too near. It is a very serious business to enter into relationship with the living God.

The people are to consecrate themselves for two days, to wash and be clean and to abstain from sexual relationships. They are to ready their minds and bodies for the coming of the Lord on the third day, "for on the third day the LORD will come down on Mount Sinai in the sight of all the people." Of

course, as a Christian it is hard to skip past that phrase “on the third day the LORD will come down,” since we know that at a different time on the third day the Lord rose up. I do not know if we are supposed to make that connection, but it is really hard not to.

So, Moses goes back down the mountain, and he tells the people to consecrate themselves and be ready for the third day, just like the Lord told him. And this is what happened next. This is 16-20.

¹⁶ So it came about on the third day, when it was morning, that there were thunder and lightning flashes and a thick cloud upon the mountain and a very loud trumpet sound, so that all the people who *were* in the camp trembled. ¹⁷ And Moses brought the people out of the camp to meet God, and they stood at the foot of the mountain. ¹⁸ Now Mount Sinai *was* all in smoke because the LORD descended upon it in fire; and its smoke ascended like the smoke of a furnace, and the whole mountain quaked violently. ¹⁹ When the sound of the trumpet grew louder and louder, Moses spoke and God answered him with thunder. ²⁰ The LORD came down on Mount Sinai, to the top of the mountain; and the LORD called Moses to the top of the mountain, and Moses went up.

I felt the tremors of an earthquake once that put cracks in our hotel wall, very unnerving. Have you stood outside in a lightning storm or seen the dark clouds of a tornado or hurricane approaching? Have you watched the waves pound against the rocks and the trees bow down in the wind and rain? How do you describe that feeling of raw natural power.

This is not natural. This is more than natural. This is supernatural. God almighty lets forth a infinitesimal degree of his power onto Mount Sinai, so that the Israelites might experience the God of all creation, the holy I Am. Ancient Near Eastern Gods like Baal, were identified with the thunder and lightening and dark clouds of the storm. This was an exceptional storm, the winds blowing so strongly over the crags of the mountain shrieked like trumpets. The very rocks shook. The great difference between God and the gods of the peoples is that those gods were thought to be the storm. The thunder and lightening and cloud was Baal. He was the phenomena. The god and the storm were one. Our God unleashes the storm. He is not the cloud. He is present in the midst of the cloud. And unlike idols of the peoples, he speaks with words that can be understand.

One more time God called Moses up to himself with words for the people. This is in 20-25.

Third mediation between God and the people

²⁰ ...the LORD called Moses to the top of the mountain, and Moses went up. ²¹ Then the LORD spoke to Moses, “Go down, warn the people, so that they do not break through to the LORD to gaze, and many of them perish. ²² Also let the priests who come near to the LORD consecrate themselves, or else the LORD will break out against them.” ²³ Moses said to the LORD, “The people cannot come up to Mount Sinai, for You warned us, saying, ‘Set bounds about the mountain and consecrate it.’ ” ²⁴ Then the LORD said to him, “Go down and come up *again*, you and Aaron with you; but do not let the priests and the people break through to come up to the LORD, or He will break forth upon them.” ²⁵ So Moses went down to the people and told them.

God has impressed the awesomeness of his power on the people of Israel. And he has affirmed Moses in his role as mediator prophet. He has invited Moses to come back up again with his brother Aaron to receive the words of the covenant. Before they come up God will speak to them the Ten Commandments. That is how chapter 20 starts, “Then God spoke all these words, saying...” After hearing the Ten Commandments, this is how the people respond. This is 20:18-21.

¹⁸ All the people perceived the thunder and the lightning flashes and the sound of the trumpet and the mountain smoking; and when the people saw *it*, they trembled and stood at a distance. ¹⁹ Then they said to Moses, “Speak to us yourself and we will listen; but let not God speak to us, or we will die.” ²⁰ Moses said to the people, “Do not be afraid; for God has come in order to test you, and in order that the fear of Him may remain with you, so that you may not sin.” ²¹ So the people stood at a distance, while Moses approached the thick cloud where God *was*.

I have heard it taught that this request of the people shows a deficiency on their part, that they should not have asked for a mediator, that it is from a lack of faith or misunderstanding of God's character. And there may be some Scripture that supports that negative view of the Israelites here, but I cannot think of it. Nothing is coming to mind. And in fact, in Deuteronomy 5:28, God affirms the people concerning this request, saying, "They have done well in all they have spoken." God intended to overawe the people. He did not want them to come up to him. He wanted them to experience the magnificence of his holiness and the raw power at his fingertips.

Still, even as he impressed upon them the fear of the Lord, we see an interesting tension in the relationship between God and man. Do you hear the oddity in what Moses said in verse 20? "Do not be afraid; for God has come in order to test you, and in order that the fear of Him may remain with you, so that you may not sin?" Did you catch that? Why is that odd? "Do not be afraid...God has come that the fear of Him may remain with you." That seems a bit contradictory. He is saying, "Don't be afraid." But the whole point of this is that fear might remain with you. How do we understand this relationship with God where his fear remains on us and at the same time we are not afraid?

This has to do with being drawn into real relationship with God. Real relationship in which we are loved by God and love God back drives out fear. When that relationship is achieved, we are not going to have to be afraid. So, how is that fear driven out? Somehow, we know we are secure in relationship with God. Somehow, we come to this knowledge that we are made acceptable. Somehow, we know that if we run into his arms, he will not strike us down. That is the removal of fear. And yet, his holiness is as the sun, consuming sin. And I am sinful. Shouldn't I be expected to be burned up? And if I do not burn up, it is not because I have become holy. I know I am not. It is because God has found some way to remove the effects of my sin in relationship with him. He has dealt decisively with the unholiness in me without consuming me.

I can approach God. But if I approach God without a sense of awe and fear then I do not really know God. By making himself knowable and approachable, he must mask his glory. But if he masks his glory then there is something about him that I do not know. If my father is a man of great influence and power, but I only know him as the guy who wears slippers, kicks a ball around, and tells great bedtime stories then do I know my father. Well, I know a side of him. And it might be a side of him that other people do not know. But I do not know him fully. To fully know him, I need to know of his power and his influence. To fully know God is to know the fear of the Lord and to also not be afraid.

There is a scene from Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* in both the movie and the book, either one. It is an interaction between Gandalf and Bilbo. Gandalf does not show his power among the hobbits. He is happy for them to see him as a common magician and inventor of fancy fireworks. It is probably the only way for him to enter into relationship with them, Hobbits not being fond of mystery or adventure or change. So, by cloaking his glory, Gandalf is able to enter into personal relationship with Bilbo, but in doing so must hide part of his true self.

So, early in the story Gandalf just about succeeds in convincing Bilbo to give up, out of his own free will, the ring of power that has this hold on him, to give it up for his own good. But the ring distorts Gandalf's motives in Bilbo's heart, so Bilbo turns on Gandalf, questioning his motives (kind of like when we question God's motives for us). "'Well, if you want my ring yourself, say so!' cried Bilbo. 'But you won't get it. I won't give my precious away. I tell you.' His hand strayed to the hilt of his small sword.

"Gandalf's eyes flashed. 'It will be my turn to get angry soon,' he said. 'If you say that again, I shall. Then you will see Gandalf the Grey uncloaked.' He took a step towards the hobbit, and he seemed to grow tall and menacing; his shadow filled the little room (Tolkien, *The Fellowship of the Ring*, Ballantine Books, 1965. 60.)."

In that one instance you are reminded that Gandalf is no mere human. He is a being of much greater power. I think we often forget with whom we speak when speaking to God. He has made himself personal. He has made us to feel his compassion. He has cloaked his glory that we might enter into

relationship with us. He speaks with us. He invites us to walk with him. He became the word in the flesh, lifting children onto his lap, walking with his disciples, comforting Martha, telling John to look after his mother. He is relatable and kind and generous. And he has invited us to not be afraid.

And so, we presume on him and on his motives. We forget that the lamb is also the lion. We forget that this man who can lift a child on his lap with great gentleness and compassion, created all things (John 1:3) and by the word of his power upholds all things (Hebrews 1:3). The disciples were shaken by this reality when he stood up in the boat and with one word stilled the wind and the waves. And that is nothing for him. By one word he brings galaxies into being. Or takes them out again. If the fear of God does not remain on our hearts, then we have forgotten who our God is.

On Mount Sinai God invited the Israelites to not be afraid while at the same time impressing on them the fear of his magnificence. How do I explain this? Right now, I am trying. Right now, as I am talking, my soul tingles. I am electrified, thinking of the awesome power of God. There is fear in my heart as I think about the fact that he could snap his fingers and everything ceases to exist, the fact that he is holy and pure and awesome. God is numinous. He is awe-inspiring. He is grand. He is fearful. And yet, at the same time, I have no sense that he has turned that fearfulness on me. He might rip out my sin, but he would not rip out me. He has made me acceptable. I am his. "Do not be afraid...but let the fear remain on you."

God, uncloaking the power of his glory in fire and smoke on Mount Sinai, communicated to Israel, "Moses is my mediator and these words are mine, not his." Let's turn now from our focus on Moses as covenant mediator to our focus on the covenant form.

Covenant form (20-23)

I am not going to read through the Ten Commandments now in chapter 20 or look at the detailed laws in chapters 21-23. I am going to wait and discuss the nature of the Mosaic laws when we get into Leviticus. And I will go deeper into the Ten Commandments when we come to the second version given in Deuteronomy. What I want to do here with Exodus 20-23 is consider how this text is modeled after a 2nd millennium suzerain-vassal treaty. God is communicating through a known form.

And remember from our past lessons that the 2nd millennium suzerain-vassal treaty contains these seven elements:

- 1 Title – the name or names of the great king and any titles he liked to go by.
 - 2 Historical Prologue – a statement about the king's historic relationship with this particular vassal people.
 - 3 Stipulations – these are commandments, the dos and don'ts of the agreement.
 - a. basic form
 - b. detailed form
 - 4 Deposition and regular reading – where the treaty should be kept and how often read.
 - 5 Witnesses – this was usually a long list of gods.
 - 6 Blessings – what the king will do if covenant is kept.
 - 7 Curses – what the king will do if covenant is broken.
- (This written covenant is then ratified by a cutting of covenant ceremony which includes a sacrifice and an oath by the vassal.)

The Ten Commandments start with this preface in Exodus 20:2, "I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery." These are the first two elements of suzerain-vassal treaty, the title, "I am the LORD your God" ("I am Yahweh Elohim") and a very short historical prologue "who brought you up out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery." It is short, but it is quite important. When we think of the Pentateuch as a covenant, all of Genesis is a historical prologue, teaching us about the relationship between God and human beings, specifically between God and Israel. But this short prologue that I am Yahweh who brought you up out of Egypt,

out of slavery, will be a regular summary of that relationship through the Pentateuch. God established the Passover meal and the Feast of Booths in Jewish culture to teach the people to look back to the Exodus as a defining moment in what it means to be the people of God redeemed out of bondage. Similarly, in the New Covenant, we are given the Lord's supper teaching us to look back to the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus Christ as our defining moment, also redeemed from bondage. We look back to the cross. They looked back to the Exodus.

After the title and historical prologue in Exodus 20:2, we get a list of basic stipulations in Exodus 20:3-17. We know them as the 10 Commandments. These are the basic stipulations of the covenant. When Moses goes back up again on the mountain, he receives a more detailed list of stipulations. That's Exodus 21-23, covering a variety of topics from slavery to personal injury law to theft to the protection of the powerless to laws of justice to farming to feast days to conquest of the land. None of the subjects addressed are addressed comprehensively. We get just a few examples from many categories of law. There is more to come in Leviticus and in Numbers and in Deuteronomy. And that's one of the characteristics of Mosaic law. The laws are given in sections in the midst of narrative. The laws come with a lot of context. To know the law of Moses, a scribe cannot just memorize Leviticus. A scribe has to know each book of the Pentateuch. And he has to know the whole story and where the sections of law come in the story. Law is not given in one big abstract code book. Study of Mosaic law requires study of the narrative context in which the different sections of law are found. Law must be understood in the context of God's story with his people.

Witnesses are not called for in this covenant, which is not odd, since witnesses in ancient near eastern covenants consisted of gods and goddesses, and God would not call gods and goddesses as witnesses. We do have a reading of the law. Exodus 24:4 tells us, "Moses wrote down all the words of the Lord." Then in verse 7 we are told, "He took the book of the covenant and read it in the hearing of the people." We do not however have a deposition of the law because we do not yet have a temple in which to deposit the law. God does have that in mind and will instruct Moses in chapter 25 to make a special container called the ark of the covenant in which to deposit the covenant law. One point of interest that comes up here is the question about the two tablets that we are going to get later. Scholars have long wondered whether there was significance to why God gave Moses two tablets instead of just one or maybe three. Why two? The most common thought is that one tablet contains the first half of the Ten Commandments that focus on loving God, and the other tablet contains the half that focuses on loving your neighbor. That definitely works theologically. That is a good observation. Though the work of archaeology uncovered an interesting detail that suggests a different option. Suzerain-vassal treaties were always made in two copies, one for the suzerain and one for the vassal. So, the whole covenant is written on both. Both contain the whole thing. And one copy would go into the temple of the vassal's main god and the other into the temple of the suzerain's main god. So, though we still do not really know, I think the best-informed guess is that the two tablets each contained the whole covenant and since there is only one true God both copies were to be placed together into his temple.

So, we have covered all the elements except blessing and curse. We do not have separate sections for blessing and curse here in Exodus. Deuteronomy is much clearer about that. But we do have the idea of blessing and curse in 23:20-33 where stipulations are given about entering the land. For example, 23:25-27 gives us the idea of blessing,

²⁵ "But you shall serve the LORD your God, and He will bless your bread and your water; and I will remove sickness from your midst. ²⁶ There shall be no one miscarrying or barren in your land; I will fulfill the number of your days. ²⁷ I will send My terror ahead of you, and throw into confusion all the people among whom you come, and I will make all your enemies turn *their* backs to you."

And we could understand verse 32-33 as the curse.

³² “You shall make no covenant with them or with their gods. ³³ They shall not live in your land, because they will make you sin against Me; for *if* you serve their gods, it will surely be a snare to you.”

So, we now have a covenant more or less in the form of a suzerain-vassal treaty. To make the covenant formal we need to ratify it with a sacrifice and an oath. This happens in chapter 24. This is covenant ratification.

Covenant ratification (24)

Remember that the Hebrew does not say that God makes covenant but that God cuts covenant. The Hebrew verb used is cut. The ancients assumed that a covenant would be ratified by the sacrifice of an animal which symbolizes the curse that would come on the vassal if he broke covenant. So, walking through the animals in Genesis 15 was meant to symbolize, “Let my body be cut in two like these animals if I break covenant with you O great king.” The shocker in that case was God himself walked through the cut animals. And here we will have to see what adjustment Moses makes to the normal ceremony, since it is not just one person, but a whole nation that is asked to make the oath.

Let’s read the ceremony as it is recorded in Exodus 24:3-8.

³ Then Moses came and recounted to the people all the words of the LORD and all the ordinances; and all the people answered with one voice and said, “All the words which the LORD has spoken we will do!” ⁴ Moses wrote down all the words of the LORD. Then he arose early in the morning, and built an altar at the foot of the mountain with twelve pillars for the twelve tribes of Israel. ⁵ He sent young men of the sons of Israel, and they offered burnt offerings and sacrificed young bulls as peace offerings to the LORD. ⁶ Moses took half of the blood and put *it* in basins, and the *other* half of the blood he sprinkled on the altar. ⁷ Then he took the book of the covenant and read *it* in the hearing of the people; and they said, “All that the LORD has spoken we will do, and we will be obedient!” ⁸ So Moses took the blood and sprinkled *it* on the people, and said, “Behold the blood of the covenant, which the LORD has [cut] with you in accordance with all these words.”

Moses adjusts the ceremony by sprinkling the blood on the people of Israel instead of having them all walk through cut up animals. It sounds like a wise, time-saving change to the normal ritual. In response to the hearing of the covenant and on the basis of the sacrifice of the animals the people repeat what they first told Moses after his very first trip down from talking with God, “All the words which the LORD has spoken we will do!” That is verse 3. They say it again in verse 7, “All that the LORD has spoken we will do, and we will be obedient!” The repetition of the oath stands out. Even with the blood of the covenant freshly sprinkled on them they do not hesitate. And remember, when the text says here, “Behold the blood of the covenant, which the LORD has cut with you in accordance with all these words,” no one is thinking of atoning blood or the blood of redemption. This is the blood of the curse. “Let our blood be sprinkled out if we break covenant with you O LORD!” That’s what they are saying. The blood on them is their blood. And in the excitement of the moment we are tempted to believe them. Maybe they believe themselves that they are going to do everything that God says. In the next month, they are going to break this covenant in a spectacular way as a whole people. The law cannot be kept. No matter how willing the heart is, human flesh is too weak.

This is why the language “blood of the covenant” has taken on new meaning for us. Through the rest of the Old Testament this idea is developed. In Jesus Christ it has been made clear that he must take the curse for us to ensure our acceptance in covenant with God. We can strive to be obedient but only because the Lord does not require our success. He has found another way through the blood of the covenant. This truth, it is already present in Moses even if it is not the idea here in Exodus 24; God walking through the covenant in Genesis 15, taking the curse on himself, and the blood of the lamb already introduced in the yearly Passover which turns away God’s wrath. It is setting us up to understand the blood of the covenant is necessary to cover us, so that we might be acceptable

because we are never going to live out the covenant no matter how enthusiastically we promise to do everything God tells us to do.

Conclusion

So, in conclusion Moses heads up onto the mountain a fifth time in 24:9. Aaron and the elders go up with him. Incredibly, in 24:10-11 we are told, “they saw the God of Israel; and under His feet there appeared to be a pavement of sapphire, as clear as the sky itself. [And it reminds you of Ezekiel and Revelation.] Yet He did not stretch out His hand against the nobles of the sons of Israel; and they saw God, and they ate and drank.” And they entered into a fellowship meal with the Lord or before the Lord.

Moses goes up further with only his servant Joshua. And then Moses goes up even further alone by himself. Moses had already written down all the words of the covenant, but God wants to give him stone tablets with the law inscribed. And God plans to come and dwell in the midst of his covenant people. For that we need a temple. So, God is going to give Moses the pattern for a tabernacle, a mobile temple for a travelling people.

We will end this lesson now with Moses on the mountain and the Israelites gazing up, wondering what will become of him. Here are the last two verses of Exodus 24, verses 17-18, “And to the eyes of the sons of Israel the appearance of the glory of the LORD was like a consuming fire on the mountain top. Moses entered the midst of the cloud as he went up to the mountain; and Moses was on the mountain forty days and forty nights.”

Reflection Questions

1. Read through Exodus 19. What stands out to you that you may have forgotten or may not have noticed before?
2. Imagine yourself as one of the Israelites standing in front of the mountain. You experienced the power of God unleashed on Egypt. There is smoke and fire on the mountain, lightening, thunder, earthquake and a sound like trumpets. You hear the rumble of a voice speak out the ten commandments. How might you have felt? You cannot know for sure. But you can imagine. Write a couple of sentences describing your possible emotion. What three or four adjectives would help describe your experience?
3. God spoke directly to the Israelites in order that they might know that Moses was not the author of these words. What convinces you that the Word of God really is his word and not the words of human authors like Moses and others?
4. How do you understand Moses command to the people in Exodus 20:21, “Do not be afraid; for God has come in order to test you, and in order that the fear of him may remain with you, so that you may not sin.”
 - a. Does “not being afraid while also fearing the Lord” make sense to you? How do you understand that from your own experience?
 - b. How does “not being afraid and fearing the Lord” enable you to not sin?
5. Read through Exodus 24. What stands out to you that you may have forgotten or may not have noticed before?
6. The people were caught up in the experience of the moment as they made their oath, “All that the Lord has spoken we will do, and we will be obedient (24:3 and 7).” Spiritual experience can have positive value. God himself chose for the Israelites to have this experience. And yet, we know they will sin with the golden calf and struggle to be obedient through years of wandering. Think of a few times that you made promises or commitment to God as a result of spiritual experience. If you can, think of a time where you general followed through with your commitment and of a time when you did not. What makes the difference? When does spiritual experience lead to commitment? When does failure lead to growth?

Lesson 12: Exodus 25-34 Rebellion in the Camp

Introduction

The Israelites ratified covenant with God at Mt. Sinai with blood and an oath. Exodus 24:7-8 records,

⁷ Then he took the book of the covenant and read *it* in the hearing of the people; and they said, "All that the LORD has spoken we will do, and we will be obedient!" ⁸ So Moses took the blood and sprinkled *it* on the people, and said, "Behold the blood of the covenant, which the LORD has made with you in accordance with all these words."

This is the blood of oath and curse. "If we break covenant with you O God, sprinkle our blood as you have sprinkled the blood of these bulls." That is exactly what is going to happen. And it is not going to take much time for the people to rebel. We have come to the true climax of the book of Exodus. We naturally think at first the climax is the Red Sea. People usually think the critical problem is on the outside. And there often are very real problems on the outside, poverty, injustice, oppression, lack of education, bullying, dysfunctional parenting. If we could just change our life circumstances, then we could enjoy the blessing of God.

No. No. There is a deeper problem. It is one thing to get the Israelites out of Egypt. It is much harder to get Egypt out of the Israelites. We bring the problem with us in the sinful desires and sinful thoughts of our human flesh. And that sinful flesh, which we own, it is ours, that sinful flesh is conformed by patterns of sinful human society. This is the problem with every church. If you want your church to be perfect, you are going to have to leave. And we keep inviting sinners like ourselves into the community. It seems like a catch-22. How does God ever form a kingdom of priests and a holy nation out of sinful people who are determined to bring his wrath on their own heads?

The incident of the golden calf is the true climax of Exodus. There enemy within is deeper and more insidious than the enemy without. The rebellion in the camp creates a true dilemma. How does holy God carry on with this rebellious people? Before getting to that climatic dilemma, let's start with an overview of Moses' 40 days on the mountain. This is in Exodus 25-31.

Moses on the Mountain with God (Exodus 25-31)

We left the Israelites in Exodus 24 gazing up at Mt. Sinai, "And to the eyes of the sons of Israel the appearance of the glory of the LORD was like a consuming fire on the mountain top." Moses has already received the basic stipulations of covenant, the Ten Commandments, and many general stipulations of covenant. These he wrote down and read out during the ratification ceremony. On this fifth trip up the mountain, Moses will receive the pattern for a tabernacle, a mobile temple for a mobile people. God's intent is to dwell in a special way with the Israelites.

God desires for heart worship from the Israelites (25:1-2).

Chapter 25 starts out this way in verses 1-2.

¹ Then the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, ² "Tell the sons of Israel to raise a contribution for Me; from every man whose heart moves him you shall raise My contribution.

To build the tabernacle pattern given by God, Moses is going to require much wealth from the plunder the Israelites brought out from Egypt, precious metals, gems, cloth and wood. God does not demand these goods as his portion of the plunder, though that would certainly be fair. Instead, he tells Moses to raise it "from every man whose heart moves him." I know that these are just a few words in a much larger text, but it is a foreshadow of the teaching to come. Deuteronomy is going to be very concerned with the heart obedience of the Israelites. So, while on one hand the covenant must operate as a strict legal code to provide order and to minimize the effects of sin and corruption that occur in any human society, the covenant also operates on the hearts of the ones who believe to draw them into a deeper walk with God. He desires a heart response from the Israelites. More on that in Deuteronomy.

God intends to dwell with his people (29:45-46).

With all the detail for the building of the tabernacle and its furnishings and the priestly garments, we might miss the central point of this section. God intends to provide the Israelites a real sense of his presence among them. He said in 29:45-46,

⁴⁵ I will dwell among the sons of Israel and will be their God. ⁴⁶ They shall know that I am the LORD their God who brought them out of the land of Egypt, that I might dwell among them; I am the LORD their God."

This is why we emphasize palace or temple as one of the six elements in our kingdom motif. It is a theological theme from Genesis all the way to Revelation. Adam and Eve experienced the presence of God in the garden. There was a tree of life and a river running through it. Revelation 21-22 give us a similar vision, though in a city, the new Jerusalem, rather than in a garden. There is there also a tree of life and a river running through it and the presence of God among his people. That is the future vision of a new heaven and new earth. For now, God plans to make his presence felt in the tabernacle which establishes some boundaries. God's glory will be revealed only in part and is only approachable to a certain point. Just as Moses walked on holy ground at the burning bush and just as the Israelites stayed off the mountain when God appeared in fire and smoke, so also there is a barrier in the tabernacle to remind the Israelites of the holiness of God.

God desires heart worship. He desires personal relationship. He says, "I will dwell among them and I will be their God." That does not mean he is the Israelites' God as opposed to being other peoples' God. Yahweh is Lord of all. But when we say, "You are my God!", we are expressing personal commitment to the Lord. This personal commitment includes personal relationship. If we are not sure how personal that could have been for Old Covenant believers, the Psalms give us a glimpse into how some of them experienced relationship with Yahweh. They felt free to pour out every kind of positive and negative emotion that we can think of. There is an intimacy of relationship there that many New Covenant believers have never experienced. And yet, God does keep a boundary around his holiness that will not be removed by the ongoing symbolic sacrifices of atonement required in the Mosaic Covenant. God will not remove the barrier to the Holy of Holies until after the one true sacrifice of atonement has been made by Jesus, much in the future, on the cross.

So, in the tabernacle, we have something amazing and beautiful and personal, yet, still communicating that there is a barrier between the holiness of God and the sinfulness of his people.

If you can imagine the beauty of the finished product and even more the experience of the presence of God dwelling in the finished product, then the reading about the tabernacle pattern takes on a sense of excitement. So, imagine preparing a stage production or a wedding celebration or Christmas decorations. And if you are a creative type that may come easier to you. I believe Moses was able to envision the rich fabrics and precious metals, all the colors of gold, scarlet, and blue, to be fashioned by skilled artisans. Imagine the glorious presence of God in the tabernacle, casting light out through the fabric. It must have been glorious in the colors, like rainbow light. And there is this fresh smell of bread every day on the table of presence and the continual release of aromatic incense. All the senses are engaged. Exodus 28:2 instructs to make garments for the priests, "for glory and for beauty." The dressing of the priests is to reflect the one they serve who is full of glory and beauty.

On the mountain top Moses experiences this grand vision of God dwelling among a people who have received him as their own. In his arms Moses holds "the two tablets of the testimony, tablets of stone, written by the finger of God (31:18)." But before he goes down, God warns him that he is not going to like what he finds at his return. Moses' experience with God on the mountain is very different from the people's experience in the camp.

Israel's Covenant Unfaithfulness: The Breaking of the Covenant (Exodus 32:1-6)

Exodus 32:1-6:

¹ Now when the people saw that Moses delayed to come down from the mountain, the people assembled about Aaron and said to him, "Come, make us a god who will go before us; as for this Moses, the man who brought us up from the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him." ² Aaron said to them, "Tear off the gold rings which are in the ears of your wives, your sons, and your daughters, and bring *them* to me." ³ Then all the people tore off the gold rings which were in their ears and brought *them* to Aaron. ⁴ He took *this* from their hand, and fashioned it with a graving tool and made it into a molten calf; and they said, "This is your god, O Israel, who brought you up from the land of Egypt." ⁵ Now when Aaron saw *this*, he built an altar before it; and Aaron made a proclamation and said, "Tomorrow *shall be* a feast to the LORD." ⁶ So the next day they rose early and offered burnt offerings, and brought peace offerings; and the people sat down to eat and to drink, and rose up to play.

As Moses experiences the beauty and goodness and truth of God in the plans he has for this people, the Israelites in their impatience and faithlessness degrade God into a form designed by the minds of men. They had experienced first-hand the otherness of God, the mystery and holiness of God. He told them that he intentionally revealed the fearfulness of his might, so that they would not sin. And yet, the pull of Egypt in their sinful flesh overcame their experience with God, overcame their oath to obey all that he has commanded. So, they fashioned an idol and called it Yahweh.

One thing that stands out to me here is how strongly our conception of God is molded by our social upbringing. The people had grown up in a culture full of idols. Every people group around them understood the gods to dwell in the physical forms of statues made in the shapes of people and animals. We do not have a record of how faithful the Jews were or were not in their worship of Yahweh while in Egypt. We do have reason to doubt. In Leviticus 17, Moses is going to have to address again the problem of idolatry again. Joshua gives us some insight into the Egypt experience when he expresses his doubts about the faithfulness of the second generation. After the conquest of the land, he will say this as part of his final charge, this is Joshua 24:14-16,

¹⁴ "Now, therefore, fear the LORD and serve Him in sincerity and truth; and put away the gods which your fathers served beyond the River and in Egypt, and serve the LORD. ¹⁵ "If it is disagreeable in your sight to serve the LORD, choose for yourselves today whom you will serve: whether the gods which your fathers served which were beyond the River, or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you are living; but as for me and my house, we will serve the LORD."

He says that your fathers served the gods beyond the River and the gods in Egypt. The gods beyond the River are the gods of Mesopotamia. Whenever the Old Covenant just mentions the River without much context it means the Euphrates river. And apparently, Abraham's family served Mesopotamian gods before Abraham responded to the call of Yahweh. But then Joshua also indicates that during their 400 years in Egypt, the fathers had been unfaithful, worshiping gods in Egypt. Now he is afraid they are going to do the same in Canaan. Wherever they go, they end up worshiping the gods prominent in that present society. It was the logic of the times. You can have your far-off creator God, Yahweh. No problem. But to worship him truly, for him to be your God and dwell among you as a people, to experience the power of his blessing in life and war, he must be with you as an idol. That is simply the way religion works. To do it any other way is ridiculous. You are not going to get results. And on top of that, you are going to need more gods than one. The Creator God is too busy with big things to care about whether you have a child or whether your crops do well or whether your shop succeeds or whether you overcome your personal enemy. There are other gods for that, other ways to get pregnant, to bring rain, to be financially successful, to get back at those who deserve it. Pleasure, control, security, identity, the gods can give you these things.

It is hard in our day to connect with the emotional and intellectual pull that the idol had on Israel. And yet, we have our own concept of what makes worship right and true. Last week I went into an

Orthodox church in Serbia. Men and women came in and bowed to the icons, the images of Jesus, Mary, and the Saints. There was a strong, pleasant smell of incense. And there was no seating. It was quite foreign to me. There was only this open area before the screen behind which the priests conduct the services. I think it was the closest to Old Testament worship, I have experienced. I can imagine an Orthodox person entering a simple, Protestant church. I don't think they would know what to do. The worship would feel strange, it would feel off, incorrect.

This feeling also exists among Protestants. In some sense you have had this feeling. You have gone into a place where it doesn't seem like people can be worshipping here. It's off. How do you worship from the heart to slow organ music? Or how do you truly worship without organ music and theologically rich hymns? How can you worship when there is a band on stage? How can you worship without a band on stage? How can you worship without moving, you are just standing, just sitting? Well, how can you worship with all the distraction of movement, all the hand raising and clapping and everybody doing something different? When we grow up in a religious community, we develop a feel for true worship. And it is developed out of our experiences. The Israelites had a feel for right worship. And it required an idol.

But this isn't just about worship. It is about how you go about living life. What gives you identity, what gives you power, what gives you security, what gives you pleasure. When you seek for these things outside of the will of God, outside the context that God has created, whatever gives you those things, identity, power, security, pleasure, whether a job, a career, a relationship, when you follow the present wisdom of your culture ("God's not concerned with these things for me. I've got to achieve them myself. There has got to be some other, something else that will give me identity, something that will give me control over my future, something that will bring me pleasure."), when you seek that outside of relationship with God, you have slipped into idolatry. You are seeking something from the creation, either in a way that was never intended, or you are seeking for it apart from finding it in God. You are meant to receive it from God. There is powerful pressure on our human flesh from society to conform to its norms, its reasoning, its patterns.

So, less than forty days after making the oath, "We will do all the LORD has commanded," the people gang up on Aaron and demand that he make gods that will lead them up to the promise land. Sadly, Aaron gives in. God had planned for Moses to collect a free will offering for the tabernacle. Instead, Aaron collects a free will offering of gold and makes a golden calf.

There is a little bit of confusion in the text as to whether the people want gods or a god. So, it depends on your Bible translation which one you get. The word Elohim is the word translated as God in the Old Covenant, but as indicated by the "im" ending in Elohim, it is a plural noun. So, it also means gods. Translators usually tell the difference by whether the verb is plural or singular. If the verb is singular, we are talking about God, and if the verb is plural, we are talking about gods. Here in verse 4 the people urge Aaron to "make us Elohim" which could be make us God or makes us gods. But then, in the phrase "who brought us up from the land of Egypt", the verb "brought" is plural. So, we would could understand the people as asking for gods who brought us up from Egypt. But then, Aaron makes one gold calf and tells the people in verse 5 that they would have a feast to Yahweh before the idol. So, I think probably the people are asking for an idol of Yahweh but along with that a host of gods. The king of kings, the main god, the creator god is surrounded by other gods. So, they are both asking for an idol of Yahweh and the gods that go with him.

The Israelites have likely broken the first three commands all at once here. The first commandment is, "You shall have no other gods before me." This means you shall have God only as your god. It also means you shall not have a pantheon. All the other peoples had a pantheon of gods with one god who ruled, and the rest gathered before that god. That is the language there, "no other gods before me." The Israelites are not rejecting Yahweh in their minds when they ask for gods or when they ask for the idol. They could set Yahweh up in the center and ask for gods around him. So, they are breaking the first command.

The second commandment is, “You shall not make for yourself an idol, or any likeness of what is in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the water under the earth.” This commandment rejects the idea of making a whole host of idols, and also rejects the idea of fashioning an idol and calling it Yahweh. Again, the Israelites might have rationalized that we are not rejecting Yahweh, “We are giving him an appropriate form.” This is “good worship.” They are molding him into their cultural image of what a god should be.

God rejects any attempt to represent him by something he has created. And he rejects the human desire to make him into an acceptable god. When we reject or downplay the biblical characteristics or stories that we find distasteful or we find uncomfortable or too hard or mysterious to explain, we are molding God into a more acceptable, culturally defined image. A God of tolerance for all behavior or a God who would never express wrath or a God who accepts worship in any form as long as it is sincere, those are all culturally acceptable forms of Christianity. If that is your Christianity, you are going to fit in. But that rejects the clear revelation that God has given in Scripture concerning himself. You might not understand the trinity. You might not understand the incarnation, Jesus as man and God. But it is not given to us to create the nature of God. Again, as I have said, he is not a result of our imagination. We are a result of his imagination. We came to be out of his mind, not the other way around. So, we may not mold a calf and call it God, but we often mold God into our own understanding of what he must be like.

The third commandment is, “You shall not take the name of your LORD God in vain.” We often think this means “do not cuss using God’s name.” And that is inappropriate. We should not cuss using God’s name, but that is not what this is about. This is about prayer. This is about using the name of God to get what we want. The ancient peoples sought to manipulate their gods for their own benefit. They had an uneasy business relationship with the gods through which they sought blessing for themselves and cursing against their enemies. They thought, “All we have to do is find the right formula for pleasing God. And it might change, so we need to keep adjusting.” They knew they needed God to win their battles. And the right way to do that is to have an idol up front and God leading them. And the idol would go before them. And they would call on God as though he is a power source that they can manipulate somehow for their own benefit. That is taking the name of God in vain. When we pray in the name of Jesus, thinking that somehow gives us power or control, then we are using magic to manipulate the Creator of the universe. Prayer is a request. Prayer is a relationship. Prayer is a trusting of God where we offer up, but we accept his answer no matter what. We do not manipulate or control him. The Israelites have made Yahweh into a form that they think they can manipulate into winning their battles for them. Instead of trusting in faith that God goes before them, they will physically carry God before them as a source of power.

In calling for the molding of an idol, the people have rejected God’s own revelation of himself, choosing instead to go with a culturally defined revelation of what a truly powerful and honorable god should look like. This is a god everybody can get behind, a god for the whole society, a god that can be manipulated for blessing and power, which means, in fact, this is no longer God.

Most of the rest of chapter 32 and 33 record interactions between God and Moses concerning the sinful treachery of the people. We will start with God’s initial judgment and this comes in verses 7-10.

Resolution of Israel’s Covenant Unfaithfulness (Exodus 32:7-34:7)

God’s Decrees Initial Judgment (32:7-10)

⁷ Then the LORD spoke to Moses, “Go down at once, for your people, whom you brought up from the land of Egypt, have corrupted *themselves*. ⁸ They have quickly turned aside from the way which I commanded them. They have made for themselves a molten calf, and have worshiped it and have sacrificed to it and said, ‘This is your god, O Israel, who brought you up from the land of Egypt!’ ” ⁹ The LORD said to Moses, “I have seen this people, and behold, they are an obstinate people. ¹⁰ Now then let Me alone, that My anger may burn against them and that I may destroy them; and I will make of you a great nation.”

This is the just judgment of the great king who is also holy God. The people have rejected his self-revelation, breaking the first three basic commandments of the covenant. They do not have the excuse of misunderstanding. God revealed himself in fire and smoke, speaking out the commandments himself. The law was clear. They promised to obey it on an oath of blood. And they have clearly broken it. They have neither feared his holiness nor shown gratitude for his gracious redemption.

Verse 10 connects together the story of the burning bush and the story of Mount Sinai with this phrase, “Let me alone, that my anger may burn against them.” The holiness of God burned on the bush, and God burned on the mountain. At the burning bush God’s anger burned against Moses the fourth time he refused God’s command. Now God’s anger burns against the Israelites.

Moses Mediates for the People (32:11-14)

After hearing this judgment, Moses responds to God as a mediator, making intercession for the people. This is verses 11-14.

¹¹ Then Moses entreated the LORD his God, and said, “O LORD, why does Your anger burn against Your people whom You have brought out from the land of Egypt with great power and with a mighty hand? ¹² Why should the Egyptians speak, saying, ‘With evil *intent* He brought them out to kill them in the mountains and to destroy them from the face of the earth’? Turn from Your burning anger and change Your mind about *doing* harm to Your people. ¹³ Remember Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, Your servants to whom You swore by Yourself, and said to them, ‘I will multiply your descendants as the stars of the heavens, and all this land of which I have spoken I will give to your descendants, and they shall inherit *it* forever.’ ” ¹⁴ So the LORD changed His mind about the harm which He said He would do to His people.

Notice how Moses intercedes. He does not plead on the basis of the people’s goodness. “They are basically good, God. Forgive them.” He does not make excuses to lessen the seriousness of their crimes. He does not make promises to God about future behavior or ritual or how they could pay God back. Moses basis his intercession on the glory of God. He does not want the Egyptians to have something about which to speak ill of God. Moses also basis his plea on the promises that God made to Abraham. It is intercession based on the glory of God and on the word of God.

Then we have this incredible statement, “So, the Lord changed his mind” about what he said he would do. The Lord changed his mind. How does the one who is the same yesterday, today, and forever change his mind? Is that what prayer is, making good enough of an argument to convince God that he is wrong? Did Moses out argue God? No. There is something else going on here.

And this is what I think is going on. This is an example of how God draws a person into experience with him in order to change the person. This is one of the main functions of prayer. We pray in order to see things the way God sees things. We lift up our requests, and we put them before God, so that lifting our eyes to him, we might see as he sees and be changed. There is similarity in God’s command to Abraham that he sacrifice Isaac. God, at that moment, drew Abraham up into his heart to experience the sacrifice that one day would be made by God’s son. Abraham had this experience of the character and the mind and the heart of God. I believe God is drawing Moses up into the tension of his own heart here.

God is both just and loving, which leads to both wrath and compassion. God cannot simply ignore justice out of compassion, or he would then cease to be holy and good. On the other hand, if God’s compassion cannot be expressed, there is no way forward for relationship with sinful people. We cannot understand the cross without understanding the seriousness of God’s justice and the greatness of his love. In this interaction with Moses, God draws him up into that tension. First, God draws out a response of compassion by letting Moses feel the full heat of his anger. The Son of God himself will be the true mediator between man and God. Moses is being given an opportunity, in a sense, to step into that role.

So, what does it mean to say that God changed his mind? I think it works as an intentional, but unspoken conditional. I think God said to himself, "I will destroy this people unless Moses steps up and intercedes for them, upon which case I will not destroy this people. And I know Moses will step up to intercede, so, I know I will not destroy this people." God's intent was for Moses to act without being commanded to act. He wanted Moses to choose to intercede. So, he only spoke to Moses the first part of the conditional, "I will destroy this people." He left the rest unspoken, so that in that space, Moses could choose whether to step forward in compassion or not. And so, according to the verbal interaction between God and Moses, it is fair to say that God changed his mind. And yet, if we are making a comment about the sovereign will of God or the nature of God, then no, in that sense the outcome was exactly what God had planned in the first place. Moses did not convince him to change his will or his purpose.

I have a personal example that helps me to connect what I am saying with how God might express part of his will, but not the whole, in order to create a space that a person might be willing to step into. My example comes from a way I have sometimes communicated as a parent. Generally, when I announced consequences for my kids, I carried through, consistency being king in disciplining children. But there were occasions where I announced consequences that were conditional, but I did not tell my kids because I wanted my kids to choose to do what was right without me telling them to. So, for example, "I asked you to clean your room three hours ago. It is a complete mess. I know that I said we would go to the park at 11:30, it is now 11:15, so, we are not going to the park today, because you did not follow through with what I asked you to do." That may be what I said aloud, while I added to myself, "But if I see contrition and the room gets cleaned in 15 minutes, I will give in and we will go to the park." In this case, I chose to not say that last part out loud because I wanted to see that decision being made by my child on her own. I want to see her take responsibility herself. So, if she comes back in 15 minutes and says, "Dad, I am sorry I did not clean my room this morning like I was supposed to. Its all clean now. Would it be possible for us to still go?" Then if I said, "Sure. Get your coat on." It would appear that I had changed my mind. It would even be fair to say I had changed my mind. But it would also be fair to say that I was acting according to my original plan. I simply did not speak my whole plan in order to hopefully bring about a change in my child's heart.

I have heard that the greatest chess masters can plan 26 moves in advance. I don't know if that is true. Its hard for me to imagine. But I am sure God can see ahead infinitely further. He knows what he is doing. And here he has created an opportunity for Moses to step into, so that Moses himself will feel the compassionate heart, will experience what it is to intercede. After God relents against destroying Israel, Moses heads down the Mountain to confront the people himself. This is in verses 15-20.

Moses' Anger Burns Against the Israelites (32:15-20)

¹⁵ Then Moses turned and went down from the mountain with the two tablets of the testimony in his hand, tablets which were written on both sides; they were written on one *side* and the other. ¹⁶ The tablets were God's work, and the writing was God's writing engraved on the tablets. ¹⁷ Now when Joshua heard the sound of the people as they shouted, he said to Moses, "There is a sound of war in the camp." ¹⁸ But he said, "It is not the sound of the cry of triumph, Nor is it the sound of the cry of defeat; But the sound of singing I hear." ¹⁹ It came about, as soon as Moses came near the camp, that he saw the calf and *the* dancing; and Moses' anger burned, and he threw the tablets from his hands and shattered them at the foot of the mountain. ²⁰ He took the calf which they had made and burned *it* with fire, and ground it to powder, and scattered it over the surface of the water and made the sons of Israel drink *it*.

The anger of God turned Moses to compassion, now faced with the sin of the people, Moses feels the burning anger of God. This is that tension between just wrath and compassionate love. We could wish that this would be the end of the punishment, that the people would repent. But they do not. First, Moses confronts Aaron. Aaron blames the people and then gives this excuse for the idol in 32:24, "I said to them, 'Whoever has any gold, let them tear it off.' So, they gave *it* to me, and I threw it into the fire, and out came this calf." Then Moses confronted the people, taking his stand in the

gate of the camp and crying out, "Whoever is for the Yahweh come to me." Sadly, only the tribe of Levi came to stand with Moses. Levi fought against or executed, the text is not clear, 3000 Israelites that day. The wrath of God is both a just punishment and also a tool to turn the people away from their wickedness and back to what is good and beautiful and true, back to God. They would not turn when given a chance to repent. They do turn when Moses and the Levites begin to carry out the just sentence for breaking the covenant oath.

Moses Again Mediates for the People (32:30-32)

After ending the worship of the golden idol and bringing the people back in line, Moses ascends one more time on the mountain to meet with God, this is his sixth time up. He is going to meet with God again as the mediator of the people. This is 32:30-32.

³⁰ On the next day Moses said to the people, "You yourselves have committed a great sin; and now I am going up to the LORD, perhaps I can make atonement for your sin." ³¹ Then Moses returned to the LORD, and said, "Alas, this people has committed a great sin, and they have made a god of gold for themselves. ³² But now, if You will, forgive their sin—and if not, please blot me out from Your book which You have written!"

That is the heart. Moses can not do that. Jesus will do that. But Moses is beginning to experience what it is to truly stand in the gap for the people to be their mediator and to intercede for them.

God Restores the Covenant (33-34)

The Lord then told Moses to depart with the people from Sinai and go up to the land of Canaan. But there will now be a change in the plan. God will no longer dwell among his people. This is 33:3-5.

³ "Go up to a land flowing with milk and honey; for I will not go up in your midst, because you are an obstinate people, and I might destroy you on the way." ⁴ When the people heard this sad word, they went into mourning, and none of them put on his ornaments. ⁵ For the LORD had said to Moses, "Say to the sons of Israel, 'You are an obstinate people; should I go up in your midst for one moment, I would destroy you. Now therefore, put off your ornaments from you, that I may know what I shall do with you.'"



We have finally come to the point of the burning bush. I said in the lesson chapter 3 that the burning bush is the symbol of the whole story. And this is it. God cannot go up with Israel. He is a holy God. And they are a combustible people. His burning anger will light them up, for they will continue to sin. And this is the great problem of the covenant. It was the problem with the promise. Abraham could not be steadily faithful. Isaac could not be steadily faithful. Jacob certainly could not keep faithful. And even the best of them, Joseph, had his faults. It is the problem with this new mosaic covenant. The Israelites cannot keep it. Moses marveled back in chapter 3 that the bush was not burned up. It is not the marvel that the bush has not burned up. It is the marvel that Israel has not yet been burned up. Israel is the bush. God is the fire. And if we do not marvel at the fact that the Lord does not burn us up, each one of us, then we have not yet come to a true understanding of our own sin. It should be a mystery. How does God put up with me? And yet, he does. How does holy God ever make lasting covenant with any group of men and women? That is the symbol of the burning bush. The fire remains on the bush, and yet, the bush is not consumed.

God has not given the answer to that problem, yet. He simply states the problem, and he gives up the plan to dwell with the people. That is one solution. God just will not go with them, so he will not burn them up. He is prodding Moses again, to make him face the problem. And Moses sees the problem. He says this in 33:15-16.

¹⁵ ... "If Your presence does not go *with us*, do not lead us up from here. ¹⁶ For how then can it be known that I have found favor in Your sight, I and Your people? Is it not by Your going with us, so that we, I and Your people, may be distinguished from all the *other* people who are upon the face of the earth?"

This is the problem. They are supposed to be a holy nation, a kingdom of priests to the peoples of the world. “But how can we be who you have called us to be if you are not present with us? We can’t be a special nation. It is your presence that makes us special. And this should be the cry of every local church, every Christian movement. Jesus have given us a new command, “that you love one another, and they will know you by your love.” Do any of us seriously think we can do that without God dwelling in our midst. It is the love of Christ through us that people experience. If we do not have a sense of the presence of the Lord among us, then what is the point of our existence. How can we be any different, how will we be distinguished from every other religious group of people, if God’s power and goodness and transforming presence is not among us?

Moses is right. This is the request God wanted Moses to make when he said, “I will not go up with you.” So, God responds in the next verse, “I will also do this thing of which you have spoken; for you have found favor in My sight and I have known you by name.” But now Moses has come back to the first problem. He has asked for fire to come into the camp. He has invited holy God among a flammable people. So, how will they not be consumed by his just wrath when they sin? “We can’t do this without you. We can’t do this with you.”

And so, Moses then makes this request, “I pray, show me Your glory!” Moses wants to see how this is going to work. Who are you that you can dwell among a sinful people without burning them up and still remaining just and holy? Show me who you are! Show me your glory!

The Lord tells Moses, “You cannot see the full glory of God and live. You are only catch a glimpse of my glory. Instead, I will my glory to you.” And he speaks to Moses the glory of his name. His name is in his character, the glory of his being. So, God hides Moses in the rock and then declares his name to him in Exodus 34:6-7.

⁶ Then the LORD passed by in front of him and proclaimed, “The LORD, the LORD God, compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in lovingkindness and truth; ⁷ who keeps lovingkindness for thousands, who forgives iniquity, transgression and sin; yet He will by no means leave *the guilty* unpunished, visiting the iniquity of fathers on the children and on the grandchildren to the third and fourth generations.”

This is the second key verse to memorize for Exodus. Exodus is very much about knowing God, according to how God has revealed himself. In chapter 3 Moses first asked the wrong question, “Who am I?” before he asked the right question, “Who are you?” Pharaoh acknowledged, “I do not know Yahweh.” And despite confirmation after confirmation in the plagues, he never sought to know Yahweh. God declared his intention to make himself known through the plagues, and so he did, to the Israelites, to the Egyptians, even to peoples further afield like Jethro in Midian and Rahab in Canaan. He made himself known to anyone who would receive that knowledge, who would receive him. And here again God makes himself known through the declaration of his name. And we see in it the tension of a truly good character, the tension between love and justice.

The second part of the name teaches us that in his compassion God continues to be holy and just. In verse 7 we are told, “yet He will by no means leave *the guilty* unpunished, visiting the iniquity of fathers on the children and on the grandchildren to the third and fourth generations.” The grace of God does not remove the consequences brought on us and on our children as a result of our sin. God does not explain here why the sin is visited on fathers and their children and their grandchildren. We will learn how that works as we continue on in the Pentateuch. God will not allow in his law punishment on children because of the sin of a parent. Each man, each woman, must pay the penalty for their own transgressions. I believe here we have a recognition of the consequence of sin. God will allow sin to have its effects. When parents turn from God, that turning away will have an effect on the children. They will be wounded. They will be molded. They will take on aspects of the worldview of their parents. There will be a spiritual effect for which the parents are responsible. And that effect will eventually lead to sin in the children. And then the children will responsible, accountable for their own sin. And if they continue to live apart from God, their lifestyle will then have an effect on their children.

It is not generational sin in the sense that children and grandchildren are punished for the sin of their parents. It is a recognition that parents have a significant spiritual influence on the direction their children will take. Sin brings consequences, not only for ourselves, but also on those for whom we have been given real responsibility.

And while God's justice will allow the effects of sin down to the third and fourth generation, we are also supposed to notice the greater abundance of God's compassion and grace, for he is the one "who keeps lovingkindness for thousands!"

What kind of holy God can live in the midst of sinful man? "The LORD, the LORD God, compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in lovingkindness and truth; who keeps lovingkindness for thousands, who forgives iniquity, transgression and sin..." The answer to the question posed by the burning bush is found here in the name of God and along with the truth symbolized by the Passover Lamb. There is the character of God and his atoning act. Because of his love and because of his grace and because of his compassion and because of his truth, God will find a way for love and justice to come together. God will find a way to atone for the sin of the people.

There is just one last thing I want to show you. Through the Old Testament, this name of God gave hope to the Psalmists and the prophets. After his great sin, David asks for forgiveness in Psalm 51, basing his request in the name of God revealed here in Exodus 34. He prayed, "Be **gracious** to me, O God, according to your **lovingkindness**; according to the greatness of your **compassion** blot out my transgressions (51:1)." Ironically, Jonah also prays the name of God, but he does so to tell God that this is exactly why he did not want to go to Nineveh in the first place. Jonah wanted vengeance on the merciless Assyrians, the superpower of the North. He told God in Jonah 4:2, that he knew this would happen, that they would repent and God would forgive, "for I knew that you are **a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abundant in lovingkindness**, and one who relents concerning calamity." For other prophets the name of God always gives space for hope. No matter how much judgement the prophets foresaw against the sin of the people, they also always saw the hope of restoration. That is because they knew their God. As Joel says in 2:13, "Rend your heart and not your garments. Now return to the LORD your God, for **He is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger, abounding in lovingkindness** and relenting of evil."

Do you know that for yourself, that you can always return to the Lord your God because he is the Lord your God compassionate with you, gracious to you, slow to anger, and abounding in his lovingkindness and truth?

Conclusion

Israel thought that the greater enemy existed outside the community. "If only we can throw off the Egyptians, we will be free." We see how untrue this is. A more insidious enemy resides within. In the emotion of the moment on Mt. Sinai, they shouted out, "We will obey all these commandments!" And yet, the disobedience came quickly and with equal enthusiasm. So, God's anger burned, like flame on the bush and fire on the mountain. Yet, the people were not consumed.

Just as we saw in Genesis, the promise of God is anchored in the character of God. Only God can bring about relationship and restore kingdom. God is committed to this sinful people. Out of his great compassion he has made a way to dwell with them without transgressing his own justice. He will be the Passover Lamb. So, he tells Moses, "Cut out two new tablets of stone, because I am going to restore covenant and dwell among my people."

Reflection Questions

1. What words would you use to guess at some different emotions Moses experienced on the mountain receiving the tabernacle pattern? He is not to the hard work yet of building the tabernacle but rather in the envisioning stage where God is forming a vision in his mind of what it is going to be like? How do you imagine his experience?
2. Observe Exodus 32:1-6. What stands out to you as interesting, strange, important, or confusing concerning in these verses?
3. The first command from God in Exodus 25 was for Moses to raise an offering of the heart by the people to build a tabernacle. And then in Exodus 32, we hear that Aaron raised a free will offering to fulfill the demand that he make a golden idol to represent the one who brought the people out of Egypt. How does the experience of Moses on the mountain underscore or emphasize the behavior of the people in the camp?
4. Now observe Exodus 32:7-35. What stands out to you in these verses?
5. What are some different ways that Moses executes the role of a mediator in 32:7-35?
6. Considering Exodus 33:3-6 and 12-16, does the burning bush as a symbol of Exodus make sense to you? What is the main problem of the book? What is the surprise declaration of the burning bush? How can that be?
7. Moses asks to see God's glory, and God declares his glory to Moses in 34:6-7. What are some things that stand out to you when you read the name of God in these verses?
8. Take a few moments to pray to God, praying his Word back to him, praising him according to his name in Exodus 34:6-7 and according to his name in Exodus 3:14.

Lesson 13: Exodus 35-40 God Indwells the Tabernacle

Introduction

The burning of Notre Dame cathedral brought about mourning from around the world at the loss of a global treasure. The French grief is severely felt. Statements out of France focus on the cathedral not as a symbol of Christian faith but as a symbol of France.

Albert Mohler reflected on the cathedral's purpose the day after the fire on his April 16 podcast of *The Briefing*. I want to repeat some of his comments here. The construction of Notre Dame began in 1163 AD. The age of cathedrals sought to emphasize the magnificent transcendence of God in contrast to the smallness of man. These great cathedrals dominated city skylines across Europe. And for over 800 years Notre Dame's great spire pointed eyes upward to the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob and to the Lord Jesus Christ.

The great cathedrals remind us that Western culture as we know it could not have come to be without the solid foundation, the worldview, of Christianity. The French Revolution attempted to remove Christian faith from the cultural equation. Notre Dame means "our lady" and the lady had always been Mary the mother of Jesus. But the enlightened French leaders replaced Mary with the Goddess of Reason and set up an altar of liberty inside Notre Dame. The state religion of reason lasted only a year. It removed Christianity without offering people answers to the deeper questions that people are always asking. So, Robespierre came up with another option, creating another new religion, declaring French belief in the Supreme Being and the immortality of the soul. That sterilized version of Christianity only lasted until Napoleon took over and re-established Christianity, seeing the need for a moral base in society, though that was out of a political motivation for a more stable France not out of true piety. Today, the majority of France does not mourn the loss of a symbol of the faith, but a loss of a symbol of France.

Something similar is going to happen to Israel. About 800 years from the construction of the tabernacle, the first mobile temple, the temple in Jerusalem will be burned down by Nebuchadnezzar's Babylonian army. By that time in Israel's history, the temple had lost its original purpose as an invitation to the Israelites to mold their personal lives and their culture around their covenant relationship with Yahweh. The temple stood to point Israel to God. Instead, the temple had become a point of ethnic pride and presumption. Without living for God or according to his precepts, the people of Judah presumed upon a special relationship with God. They acted as though Jerusalem gave God glory and identity rather than the other way around. They gave lip service to the Mosaic covenant while living according to the spirit of their modern age. They trusted in the fact of the temple, calling out, "the temple, the temple, the temple (Jeremiah 7:4)" as though the presence of God's house in the midst of the city would serve as a talisman guaranteeing safety from enemies despite their rejection of God in their everyday lives. Ezekiel tells them that they are sadly mistaken, describing in his prophecy a vision of God abandoning his own temple as his glory rises up, out of his house and out of Judah (Ezekiel 10:4, 18-19; 11:23). They forgot that God is so much greater than his temple. And so, the city fell, and the temple was burned to the ground.

The temple, like a great cathedral, fails at its purpose when people see it as a national symbol or as a symbol of their own great accomplishments and history instead of seeing it as a place to meet with God and be formed by God. The tabernacle is supposed to provide a constant reminder to Israel not to look outward for direction on how to form their religious, moral, and civil worldview. They are also not to look inside their own hearts. They are to look to God whose presence dwells in the center of the people. And they are not to look at the tabernacle and glory in their own achievement. It will be beautiful. It will be a great marvel accomplished by a slave people. Great amounts of treasure will be expended for its construction. The wood, fabric, precious metals, and gems will dazzle, evoking wonder and awe. But the tabernacle is still only a house. They are not to look to the tabernacle. They are to look to the God of the tabernacle to transform their society.

I. God Renews the Covenant (34:10-35:3)

Here is our great problem. God is a holy God, and Israel a combustible people. It is the burning bush. How does holy fire live among a sinful people without burning them up? The back and forth we had between God and Moses in Exodus 32 and 33 with Moses pleading for the people and imploring God to dwell among them, this back and forth underscored the seriousness and impossibility of the promise. God draws Moses into the debate so that Moses might experience this problem himself and recognize there is no solution in Israel. So, again, as with Abraham, God declares that the solution will fall on him, on his nature, his glory, his name, "The LORD, the LORD God, compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in lovingkindness and truth; who keeps lovingkindness for thousands, who forgives iniquity, transgression and sin; yet He will by no means leave *the guilty* unpunished (Exodus 34:6-7a)." This God, this God will make a way to dwell as holy among his sinful people because of who he is. How will God do this? That is not revealed, though the Passover lamb is a hint.

In this lesson we are addressing the last six chapters of Exodus, chapters 35-40. We'll start with the renewal of covenant after the golden calf incident, and then we will consider the symbolism of the tabernacle and the importance of God dwelling with his people.

Covenant Renewed: Moses' Last trip up the Mountain (34:10-35)

Moses has to make one more trip up the mountain. After God declares his name, the rest of Exodus 34 and 35 tell us about God renewing covenant. God recreates the stone tablets and warns Moses that Israel must take care going into the promise land. He will give them victory against the armies of the Canaanite peoples, but they themselves must fight against the Canaanite culture of idolatry and immorality. They must not enter into covenant with any of the people. God adds in 34:17, "You shall make for yourself no molten gods." That is a jab at Israel for their sin with the golden calf and a serious warning. Mankind wants to mold God. Yahweh insists that he is "I Am." His people do not mold him. He molds his people.

Chapter 34 continues with a representative selection of stipulations of dos and don'ts. These are not meant to be understood as a new covenant or as the whole of the covenant. These stipulations point to the laws already given on Mt. Sinai and also to the ones we are still going to get in Leviticus. It is a selection representing the reaffirmation of the whole. But this selection also makes a point, focusing as it does on the three main festivals and the Sabbath day. God is communicating to Israel that he is in charge of ordering society. The Israelites will be encouraged to rise up and dance and sing but not like they did around the golden calf. The singing and dancing was not the problem. The calf was the problem. Their joy and happiness should be a response to relationship with God and a remembering of his past and present goodness to them. God wants them to feast but according to how he orders society. As the people struggle with the radical social transition of leaving the old ways of Egypt and resisting the new ways of Canaan, they need help focusing on the reality that these words of the covenant are not being made by Moses. God is revealing to them truth for ordering of life and worship and civilization. So, God causes the residue of his glory to shine on the face of Moses to establish the authority of his words. These are not the words of Moses. These are the words of God communicated by Moses. And we constantly need that reminder. The truth of the Bible is not a list of human suggestions. It is not there to just give us inspiration. The Bible is God's Word for us. It is our pattern for life.

The Sabbath as Sign of the Mosaic Covenant (35:1-3 and 31:12-17).

The renewal the covenant is completed in 35:1-3 with a restatement of Sabbath. Why repeat the Sabbath regulations? We already read about the dos and don'ts of Sabbath when Moses received the temple pattern. Why repeat it here? Sabbath is repeated because Sabbath serves a special function as the sign of the Mosaic Covenant.

At the end of the tabernacle pattern section, God commanded Sabbath observance using language similar to the command for circumcision given to Abraham. Regarding circumcision, God used this language in Genesis 17:10-13.

“This is My covenant, which you shall keep, between Me and you and your descendants after you: every male among you shall be circumcised...it shall be the **sign of the covenant between Me and you**...thus shall My covenant be in your flesh **for an everlasting covenant.**”

Concerning the Sabbath, God used this language in Exodus 31:13 and 16.

“You shall surely observe My sabbaths; for *this* is a **sign** between Me and you throughout your generations, that you may know that I am the LORD who sanctifies you...So the sons of Israel shall observe the sabbath, to celebrate the **sabbath throughout their generations as a perpetual covenant.**”

There are three similarities in the language between the instructions given Abraham about circumcision and the instructions given Moses about the sabbath. (1) First, both circumcision and the sabbath are called signs. (2) Second, both are to be an everlasting or perpetual covenant for the Israelites. (3) And third both texts use the sign of covenant as symbolic of the whole covenant. This is the language, “This is my covenant...every male among you shall be circumcised” and “they shall celebrate the sabbath...as a perpetual covenant.” Circumcision was not the covenant and the sabbath was not the covenant but for both God says, “This is my covenant with you.” He means according to this sign, the sign of circumcision and the sign of sabbath each one of them represent covenant. Circumcision represents the Abrahamic covenant. Sabbath represents the Mosaic covenant.

Both signs set the Israelites apart from the peoples around them. At the time of Exodus, the Egyptians used a 12-month calendar with 30 days per month. And they divided those 30 days into three 10-day periods. Some scholars believe there is evidence that the last two days of that period was free from labor, such that the Egyptians had a 10-day week with eight days of labor and two days off. In Abraham’s day, the third empire of Ur calculated a man’s labor as nine days of work with one day of off (Kriwaczek, *Babylon*, 146).

So, with the sabbath command, God established his own rhythm for Israel. They are to order their society around a seven-day work week with six days on and one day off. The sabbath rest applied to everybody, including slaves, even animals. Israel was not to do trade with foreigners who did not recognize the sabbath. And we can see how this would set their society off from those around them. They are not on the same rhythm. It is like Chick-fil-A on Sunday. You can’t get your chicken nuggets and lemonade. They shut the doors on Sunday. That makes them different. And being different was one of the purposes of sabbath, “that you may know that I am the LORD who sanctifies you (31:13).” To be sanctified is to be set apart and to be made clean. And the sabbath set Israel apart as different while requiring the Israelites to stop whatever they were doing and focus on who Yahweh is and how they are doing in relationship with him. God said, “It is a sign between Me and the sons of Israel forever; for in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, but on the seventh day He ceased *from labor*, and was refreshed (31:17).” The point of the seven-day rhythm is to remind us every week that we serve the God of Creation and that this God of Creation gives us rest.

The tabernacle, the festivals, the sabbath day, they all work to draw the focus of the Israelites to God as the central reality in their lives. After the golden calf, they need this point hammered home. God is at the center of all things. God himself is to be the ordering principle of Israelite society and culture. True, abundant, human life is accomplished by recognizing that fact. If God is not at the center of your life, if he is not at the center of your family culture, then you can’t experience life as life is meant to be experienced. And it changes, it should change how we think about everything. Even deeper, it is meant to change our hearts. I am not the center of my life. God is. My plans should not guide my life. God’s should. This is real life, to walk with God and yield everything to him.

II. Construction of the Tabernacle (35:4-40:38)

Contribution for the Tabernacle (35:4-36:7)

With the covenant renewed, Exodus 35:4 picks us up where we should have been at the end of Exodus 31 before the sin of the golden calf.

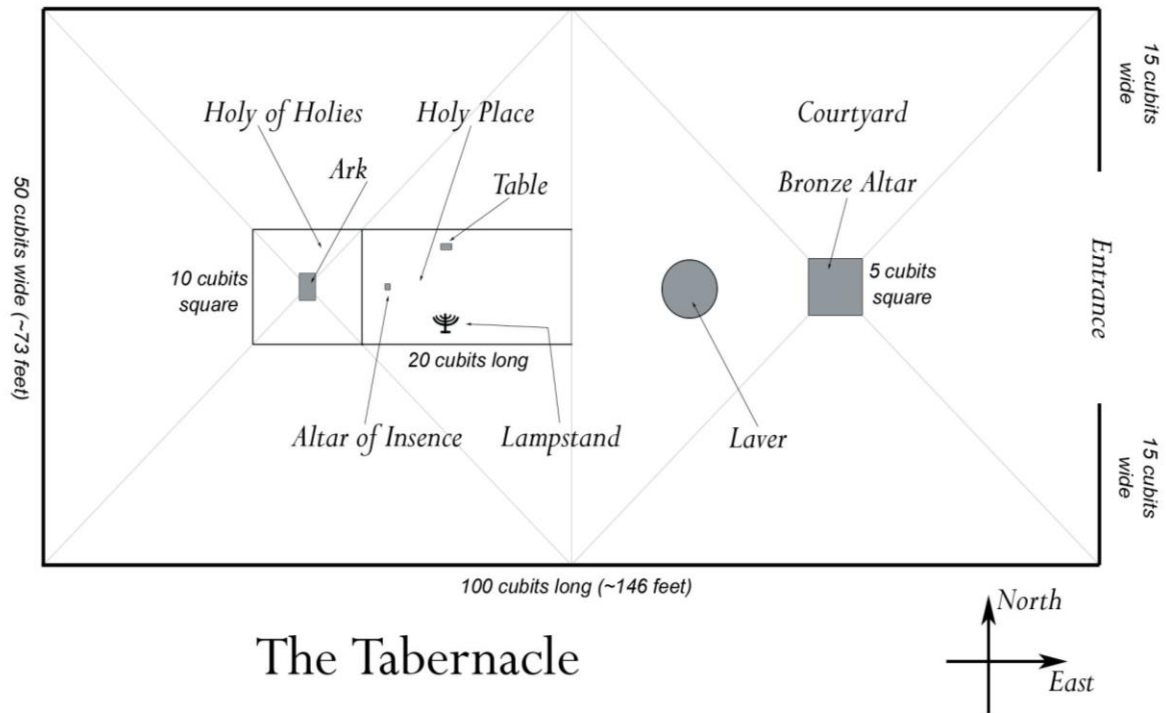
Moses spoke to all the congregation of the sons of Israel, saying, "This is the thing which the LORD has commanded, saying, 'Take from among you a contribution to the LORD; whoever is of a willing heart... (Exodus 35:4-5a)'"

If we cut out the sin of worshipping a golden calf, then Moses would have come off the mountain full of joy, announcing to the Israelites his vision of a mobile temple and asking for an offering from the heart. The text reports that the Israelites respond with more than enough. And we can only imagine how wonderful it would have been if Israel would have not sinned with the golden idol and then Moses came off and we have this great response. We are getting late, but we are still getting it. Then God empowers skillful men and women to do the construction. And a couple of things should make us wonder about the contribution and the skilled men and women. We should wonder how the Israelites got all the expensive metals, wood, gems, and fabric required. They had been a nation of oppressed as slaves. And perhaps their wealth suggests there was some kind of social structure among the Israelites even in their oppressed state. We know that they had foremen and they had elders. We just don't know much else about their structure. But the best assumption is that the contributions came from the plunder of Egypt reported in chapter 12:35-36. The Egyptians paid the Israelites to leave their country after the last plague. And the text specifically mentions the Israelites asking for gold, silver, and articles of clothing and getting it. So, that is where they got the stuff to contribute. We might also wonder how bricklayers obtained the advanced artistic skills required for this kind of construction. Even though the majority of Israel was pressed into producing bricks for Egyptian construction projects, we should imagine some organization and variety in such a large community of people. Talented men and women may have been used as slaves in skilled labor and as their talents become known, they may have been given opportunity to develop skills useful to the Egyptians.

So, the giving for the tabernacle makes sense, and that they had people skilled to do it, we can believe that too, that makes sense. But then we come to a text that puzzles all western readers. We just can't figure out why it is here. The majority of western readers see little point in the detailed description of the tabernacle construction recorded in chapter 36:8 all the way to 40:33. That's five chapters. And these are the five chapters where you are most likely to give up reading Exodus. It is almost a verbatim repeat of the vision Moses received in chapters 25-30. So, if you did not give up there, good job if you made it all the way through chapter 40. The first list of detail was hard enough for most people to read through, much less reading it all again. Why not come to 36:8 and just state the first half of verse, "All the skillful men among those who were performing the work made the tabernacle," and then skip over the five chapters of detail to 40:34, "Then the cloud covered the tent of meeting, and the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle"? I mean really, the tedium of the repetition is pointless. Isn't it? Well, no, it's not. Of course, it is not. It is in the Bible for a reason. There is a point to it all. I am going to let you wait a little longer before I explain the point of all the repetition. I am going to come back to it. But in this repetition, this is a good chance for us to consider the symbolism of the tabernacle.

The Symbolism of the Tabernacle (36-40; also in 25-30)

When we approach the tabernacle on the ground moving horizontally from the entrance to the holy of holies, there is a three-part division of holiness. The tabernacle is essentially an outer rectangle and an inner rectangle. The outer rectangle is not covered. So, just through the entrance there is an open courtyard. And after the courtyard there is a covered rectangle, or tent, divided into two parts. First, there is the holy place. And then, moving through the holy place there is an inner chamber called the Holy of Holies. Moving horizontally then there is the courtyard, a holy first chamber and a most holy second chamber.



The Tabernacle

The three-part division of holiness is also represented by the priesthood. All of Israel is to be a kingdom of priests, a holy nation. Everybody is a priest in some sense. So, everybody is holy. And so, the Israelite worshipper brings his sacrifice to the courtyard but can't go further. The priests are set apart as symbolically more holy. Not really more holy but symbolically more holy. They serve a special function. They can enter inside the tent to the first holy place to perform their duties but can go no further. Then there is the high priest who is set apart symbolically as most holy. And he is allowed to enter into the presence of God in the Holy of Holies once a year.

The divisions of the tabernacle emphasize that God has made a way for his holiness to dwell with his people without burning them up. But there is still a barrier. For the people to stay safe they need regular atoning sacrifice, and experience God closely, yet, still at a distance.

So, that is the horizontal symbolism of moving horizontally deeper into the tabernacle. We can also think about the tabernacle vertically. As a person moves horizontally from courtyard to holy place to Holy of Holies, that person is symbolically moving from the earth to the sky to the spiritual heaven. It is a vertical movement. This is emphasized by the furniture that we find in the tabernacle. The outer courtyard has a large bronze laver, like a huge basin of water, also called a sea (s-e-a, like the Mediterranean Sea). And then there is a bronze altar that has four horns. And the word used for horns on the altar is also the word used for the top of a mountain, the horn of a mountain. So, there are four horns representing the four primary directions, north, south, east, and west. So, the courtyard represents the promise land. So, the whole courtyard is the land. The altar represents the mountains, and the laver represents the sea or the waters. And blood would be sprinkled on the tabernacle courtyard to symbolically atone for sin made in the whole land of Israel.

Moving then into the holy place there is a table of showbread, the lampstand, and the altar of incense. The bread would later represent manna that comes from the sky, and it would be a continual reminder that God provides for the Israelites sun and rain from the sky to provide food. The lampstand represents the light of sun, moon, and stars. While the altar of incense represents the prayers of the priests, and you can even see it physically, the incense smoke rises upward, skyward, heavenward.

Then inside the Holy of Holies, we have moved into a supernatural heaven, which is figuratively above the literal heavens. And there is no light required here apart from the glory of God. He is surrounded by angels woven into the tapestry, kneeling face down on the lid of the ark of the covenant. And the lid, which is also called the mercy seat, is God's footstool as we imagine him seated on his throne.

In this tabernacle pattern, there is not much here that would stand out as wrong or odd to the Israelites, only one thing. The mobile temple fits in with religious conceptions of the Ancient Near East; the altars for sacrifice and incense, the candles and bread, the sea for washings of purification, the ark in which is to be placed a covenant, the extravagance. It all fits with Ancient Near East culture. This is a home fit for a god. But that is the one big problem. God is a great communicator. And he has taken something understood in order to communicate something radically different. He has provided a palace, but there is no god in the palace. And that makes no sense to the Ancient Near Eastern mind. Why would you build an empty temple? The one thing you would expect to see if you were granted entrance would be an idol. Everybody knows that in the Holy of Holies there must be an idol. There must be a god. But that is the one thing that God has left out.

Isaiah will declare in Isaiah 66:1, "Thus says the LORD, 'Heaven is My throne and the earth is My footstool. Where then is a house you could build for Me? Where is a place that I may rest?'" The tabernacle is a place where God will make his presence known. He is going to manifest himself. And he is going to draw the Israelites eyes and minds to himself in the tabernacle. But God is so much more than the tabernacle. God is not a god who can be contained. And he rejects the whole idea of idols.

Construction of the Tabernacle: Why the Repetition? (36:8-40:33)

Now back to the question, "Why the repetition in Exodus 36-40?" All of this symbolism we could have considered through the first giving of the tabernacle details back in Exodus 25-30. We don't need the repeat of it to get the symbolism. Why the repetition?

First, let me point out that there is really not that much detail here in the first place. I know you will say, "What are you talking about, not a lot of detail? It is way too much detail." And there is a lot of detail if you read it just to get through it. You are just trying to pick up some theological explanation, or you want the story to move on. If you do not really care about the temple pattern, your mind does not see significance to all this detail. And I admit myself often skimming through these chapters when reading Exodus. But there is a way to bring the detail more to life. I suggested this last in the last session. To bring it to life, we have to imagine building it. We need to use the creative side of our brain, not only the engineering side of our brain. My younger brother Bill graduated with a degree in Dramatic Arts with a focus in Costume Design and Construction from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. In order for his family to eat, he works for a bank, converting retirement plans that they buy up. Apparently, that takes creativity, which he has a lot of. His primary way of using design talents is through the Light Theater Company that he and his wife Tiffany founded to give their daughter and her friends an opportunity to experience theater. And the costumes and sets they produce have been incredible. So, I asked Bill from a design perspective whether or not there is a lot of detail in the vision given Moses for the tabernacle and the priestly garments. And Bill's response immediately was, "Not at all. There is no way I could build this without using a lot of creative license. There is just not enough detail."

I had a sense of what he means earlier in this lesson when I said that in the Holy of Holies the angels knelt on the mercy seat. But I do not know if they were standing or kneeling. I can only picture them kneeling. But the text does not say. It only says they are looking down and their wings are pointing towards one another. But even more important, we have no idea what a cherubim looks like. I am absolutely sure it was not a fat, chubby baby like you see in Renaissance paintings. But what did they look like? There is no explanation in the text. These skilled artisans are just told, "You need to fashion a cherubim." But how do they know what that looks like? What do you do if you are the sculptor or

if you are tasked with weaving them into the curtains? This is what Bill meant by not enough detail. There are hundreds of details not mentioned that a skilled artisan needs if he is going to figure this out.

Except that I think that is the beauty of it for the artisan. They get excited by having a general framework to work with and then they get to use some freedom to dream and envision. And that's how we want to come at this text. We want to come creatively, envisioning what the glory and beauty of the finished product will be like. We want to dream of making something worthy of God. Forget trying to fashion God into some golden animal. Let's build him a palace!

Okay, that does not really answer our repetition problem. We may have used up all our creative energy imagining the first time we got the detail. But what we need to do now is add in all the emotion, the anger, the sadness, the fear, the disappointment that comes with the destruction of that dream. We were with Moses, and we were excited. And now the people have destroyed it. The golden calf ended it all in a tragic way. God gave us this beautiful vision for the fulfillment of a beautiful promise. He would dwell with us. And we have ruined that. The people have ruined that. We are guilty. We fought with one another. People died. The dream of a holy nation living in a promised land with their God is ruined. There is no return to Eden.

But then, out of the tragedy, God declares his glorious name and he says, "I will make a way. I will re-covenant with you. And I will dwell with you." Now the excitement begins to come back as we start to repeat the detail. Wow. We thought it was not going to be but now it seems like it might be. In narrative terms chapters 34-40 cover the falling action of the story. We have passed through the near tragic climax. We are now ready to bring the story home to resolution. But the term "falling action" might throw us off of how we are supposed to read the remaining chapters. This remaining action is a rising kind of expectation. The grand vision of God dwelling among his people might yet come true. And repeating all the detail of the tabernacle construction draws out our anticipation as we slowly, step by step, detail by detail, move toward this final paragraph. And it may work better if we were listening to it read, then if we were just sitting on our own, trying to read through it, if we could hear the appropriate emphasis.

And as we are hearing it read and the detail is getting repeated, when we get into chapter 39, we would start to hear a refrain, a repeated phrase. This is in 39:1.

Moreover, from the blue and purple and scarlet *material*, they made finely woven garments for ministering in the holy place as well as the holy garments which were for Aaron, **just as the LORD had commanded Moses.**

Then in verse 5,

⁵ The skillfully woven band which was on it was like its workmanship, of the same material: of gold *and* of blue and purple and scarlet *material*, and fine twisted linen, **just as the LORD had commanded Moses.**

Verse 7, "just as the LORD had commanded Moses;" verse 21, "just as the LORD had commanded Moses;" verse 26, "just as the LORD had commanded Moses;" verse 29, "just as the LORD had commanded Moses;" 15 times as the priests' garments are finished and the tabernacle assembled the text says that the Israelites did "just as the LORD had commanded Moses." After the near fatal sin of fashioning God according to their own imagination, the skilled men and women of Israel commit themselves to bring to life the vision God has given them. They are not improvising religion here but seeking to faithfully produce something pleasing and honoring to the Lord. For Israel to be a kingdom of priests and holy nation full of the life and goodness and beauty of God, they are going to have to submit their culture to him, they are going to have to commit to doing "just as the LORD commanded Moses." God provides the pattern of life. These men and women do just as the LORD has commanded, using their own skill and imagination appropriately within the pattern provided.

God Indwells the Tabernacle (40:34-38)

And so, we come successfully to the resolution of the book of Exodus in the last paragraph. Exodus 40:34-38,

³⁴ Then the cloud covered the tent of meeting, and the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle.

³⁵ Moses was not able to enter the tent of meeting because the cloud had settled on it, and the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle. ³⁶ Throughout all their journeys whenever the cloud was taken up from over the tabernacle, the sons of Israel would set out; ³⁷ but if the cloud was not taken up, then they did not set out until the day when it was taken up. ³⁸ For throughout all their journeys, the cloud of the LORD was on the tabernacle by day, and there was fire in it by night, in the sight of all the house of Israel.

With God causing his presence to manifest, the tabernacle becomes the center of the new Israelite nation. After some time in the land, a temple will be built in Jerusalem as the center of the nation meant to be holy and to serve as priests bringing blessing to the peoples of the world. That was the promise to Abraham that through him all nations would be blessed.

And yet, the history of Israel, through the whole of the Old Testament, is going to teach us that something is seriously lacking. Humanity needs more than God has given in the Old Testament. Humanity needs salvation both from the guilt of sin and from the power of sin. So, God is going to give a New Covenant. We live under that New Covenant.

III. Jesus fulfills the tabernacle symbolism (John 1:14-18)

The New Covenant has provided us with a new center. We no longer look to a temple to see the glory of God. John wrote in his gospel in 1:14, "And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us, and we saw His glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth." This one sentence brings us right back into the book of Exodus. John is going to use the idea of abiding or dwelling as a major theme in chapter 14 and 15 of the gospel when he exhorts Christians to abide in Christ. That word abide is a common Greek word. But here he uses a rare Greek word in 1:14 when he says the Word dwelt among us. The word literally means "to live in a tent," or as King James English would say, "to tabernacle." John 1:14 also tells us that in seeing Jesus we are seeing the glory of God. So, we have the word tabernacle and the word glory. That is the last paragraph of Exodus. The glory of God dwelt in the tabernacle. John 1:14 goes on to say that this glory is full of grace and truth, two Greek words which can translate the last two Hebrew words of God's name in Exodus 34:6, "abounding in loving kindness and truth," lovingkindness and truth, grace and truth. John goes on to refer directly to Moses in 1:17 saying, "the Law was given through Moses; grace and truth were realized through Jesus Christ." God declared his name to Moses. Jesus realizes that name in himself. Then John 1:18 alludes to Moses not being able to see the full glory of God saying, "No man has seen God at any time; the only begotten who is in the bosom of the Father, he has explained him." Moses has not seen God, not the full glory of God. He has spoken with God, but God has to veil himself for Moses. Jesus has seen God fully. So, only Jesus can fully make God known.

In the Old Covenant God revealed his character through his name. In the New Covenant God reveals his character by becoming a man. In Jesus, we see his glory. The night of his arrest, Philip said, "Jesus, show us the Father." Jesus looks at Phillip. "Do you not know me?" He responds in 14:9, "He who has seen me has seen the Father." And then the glory and love and justice of the Father is spectacularly revealed in Jesus as he is lifted up on the cross, lifted up into glory. What a commitment to holiness! What incredible, unconditional love! Then Jesus is lifted up further. He is raised from the dead and lifted into heaven. His tabernacling on earth seems to have lasted only during his lifetime. But after returning to heaven, Jesus fulfilled a promise that he made to his disciples and sent the Holy Spirit to dwell in us. So, removing the guilt of sin by his death, and he now gives us power to overcome sin by his life in us.

Temples and Cathedrals and churches still stand to point us to God, but as New Covenant believers we do not look to any geographical place as our center. Or to any building. We look to Jesus Christ. He has fulfilled the temple pattern. He died as the atoning sacrifice on the altar. His blood is spilled on the

mercy seat in the Holy of Holies. He is the bread of life set out on the table of presence and the light of the world shining from the holy menorah. He is the water of life in the laver by which we are all purified.

Jesus, not the tabernacle, reveals to us the glorious nature of God. As John tells us, Jesus reveals the name of God declared in Exodus 34:6, “full of grace and truth.” John also declares that Jesus is the “I Am” of Exodus 3:14, the very name of God. Jesus proclaims, “I Am the resurrection and the life. I Am the door. I Am the good shepherd. I Am the bread. I Am the light. I Am the true vine. I Am the way, the truth and the life. And before Abraham existed, I Am!”

This is our Jesus. And Jesus has finally removed the guilt of sin through payment on the cross. And in so doing, tore down the curtain barring us from the Holy of Holies. We are invited all the way in to the throne room of God. And Jesus has not left us alone. God still indwells his temple. What temple? You. You are the New Covenant temple, as crazy as that sounds and as unworthy as you are, God has made a way. Paul asks, “Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God, and that you are not your own (1 Corinthians 7:19)?” There is also a corporate reality to the temple. You are the temple of God as an individual believer, and we together are the temple as the body of Christ, the church, as Paul also says, “Christ Jesus himself being the corner stone, in whom the whole building, being fitted together is growing into a holy temple in the Lord; in whom you also are being built together into a dwelling of God in the Spirit (Ephesians 2:20a-22).”

When a great cathedral like Notre Dame burns to the ground, we rightly mourn the loss of a symbol of Christian culture, a symbol that pointed heavenward for 800 years to the Lord Jesus Christ. At the same time, we are reminded that the temple of God is not a building. This is the incredible truth. You are the temple of God, you and your brothers and sisters in Christ; that you exist to point people to the God of heaven, to be a kingdom of priests, and a holy nation tasked with the job of living a new kind of community in which we look to Jesus Christ as the center and as the pattern for everything we do. And we are tasked with living out his word, and we are commissioned to call everyone who will listen, “Come and eat and drink, for Jesus is the bread of life and from him flows everlasting water. We are the temple. He dwells in us. We dwell in him. And we are the sign to the world. Amazingly, we are not burnt up by our sin. Jesus has made a way, so that the holy fire of his presence does not consume us. It purifies.

Reflection Questions

1. What stands out to you as you read Exodus 36:10-28? What do you notice as interesting or important or strange or confusing? What questions come to mind?
2. The commands given again to Moses affirm the commands already given. Why do you think the Lord chose to focus on the festival days and the sabbath? How do these particular days help mold the culture of the Israelites? What truths are the different festivals and the sabbath day intended to point the Israelites to? Truths about God and/or truths about themselves?
3. As you survey 35:4-40:38, what aspects of the tabernacle or priests' garments stand out to you as powerful, interesting, confusing or strange?
4. How can you apply the three-part holiness division of the people (people, priests, high priests) and the tabernacle (courtyard, holy place, Holy of Holies) to your present Christian experience in any way? What importance lies in understanding the holiness of God? Why was that so important for God to impress on his people?
5. How does the phrase “just as the LORD commanded Moses” help you to understand the repetition of the tabernacle details? Can you connect with the idea of a slow building of anticipation?
6. What do you think it meant to the Israelites to see God indwell the tabernacle?
7. What does it mean to you to think about yourself individually as the temple of the Holy Spirit and to think about your brothers and sisters in Christ corporately as the temple of the Holy Spirit?

Lesson 14: Leviticus 1-7 and 23-27 Ritual

Introduction

Why study Leviticus? It is not an easy book to study. There is very little narrative. And it is especially dedicated to kingdom requirements, the stipulations of covenant between God and Israel. These are the dos and don'ts of relationship with God. But these are the dos and don'ts of their covenant, not the do's and don'ts of our covenant. We have a new covenant. So, why study Leviticus?

I'll give you four reasons.

1. First, and this is true of our whole study of the Pentateuch, we study the Old Covenant in order to better understand the New Covenant. When we see the continuity between the two covenants, we gain deeper insight into what is foundational. These things have always been true, for our culture and for their culture. These are the things that stay the same. And when we see the discontinuity, we gain insight into what is special about our covenant. What was not working in the Old? We want to let go of what God wants us to let go. What is special about the New? We want to grab onto that which God specially designed to make the New Covenant a better covenant. Studying the Old helps us to fully live in the New. That's one reason we need to study Leviticus.

2. Second, there is practical truth here for us to apply. God's laws provide for and protect his people. Not all of those laws apply to us directly in the New Covenant. So, we are going to have to think about what does apply and what does not apply and why? We can't just arbitrarily pick and chose. And we will talk about that later. But even the laws that do not apply, such as ceremonial rituals and the food laws and the various festivals, those commands were given for a purpose. And if we can understand how Israel experienced protection, provision, teaching through those commands, then we can gain practical wisdom and principles to apply in our New Covenant life.

3. Third, knowing Leviticus enables us to answer some tough questions about the Bible. Quite frankly, there are some strange and troubling commandments in Leviticus. So, how do we understand laws that seem to treat women as less valuable than men? And what do we do about the acceptance of slavery? And how do we explain the severity of God in his punishments? A study of Leviticus is going to give us a framework that we can use to help us understand, help us put into perspective what God was doing with these laws. And we need to seek understanding. If we are in a position of looking down on the law of God, we think something is wrong with this, then we are judging God himself as not good or not wise or not just. We need an appreciation for that which we find strange and troubling. We want to investigate the tough questions for our own understanding, but also so we can answer with some confidence sceptics and our kids.

4. Fourth, the Levitical code emphasizes the importance of being separate from human culture in worldview and in behavior. That's an emphasis that we can use today. We still struggle with the desire to conform our beliefs and behaviors to our culture. The Levitical code can challenge us to think about God's holy character, what holiness looks like, and how that should apply in New Covenant community. This is the main purpose of the book, to provide the Israelites with a way of approaching God that honors his holy character. The Levitical code provides a ritualized way of approaching God and a moral way of approaching God. God is honored both through ceremonial worship and through moral life practice. How do we set ourselves apart as holy in our worship of God?

The short Leviticus Overview video by the Bible Project does a great, great job explaining the Levitical code as a way of approach to our holy God. I really encourage you to check out this one. If you have not looked at any of the other Bible Project videos, this is one that you should not miss. It really helps with understanding the whole of the book. And you can check it out on youtube or at observetheword.com on the [Pentateuch Resources page](#).

Remember the great problem of the burning bush in Exodus. How does a holy God live among a sinful people without burning them up? God has determined to dwell among Israel. And that invites

fire into the camp. God's holiness is good and powerful but also destructive when in contact with sin. At the end of Exodus, God indwelt in the tabernacle, but not even Moses could enter into the tent due to the intensity of God's glory. God decided to maintain a barrier of holiness between himself and his people and at the same time he is giving them a way that they can draw near to him in relationship.

The Bible project will explain Leviticus as a seven-part chiasm. I think it is a wonderful structuring of the book. Chapters 1-7 and 23-27 at the beginning and end of the book form the outer frame. Both sections focus on ritual. The second frame is chapters 8-10 and 21-22. Both of these sections focus on the priesthood. The third frame is chapters 11-15 and 18-20. And these both focus on purity. Then in the very middle of the book, chapters 16-17, we have the Day of Atonement. And that center section is going to be our monument of grace for Leviticus.

| Leviticus: Kingdom Requirements | | | | | | |
|---------------------------------|--------------|---------------------------|--------------|----------------------|------------|----------------------|
| Key Passage: 19:2 | | | | | | |
| 1-7 | 8-10 | 11-15 | 16-17 | 18-20 | 21-22 | 23-27 |
| Ritual | Priesthood | Purity | Atonement | Purity | Priesthood | Ritual |
| Sacrifices | Consecration | Ceremonial
cleanliness | Substitution | Moral
cleanliness | Standards | Festivals,
etc... |

So, the three parallel sections give us ritual, priesthood and purity code, all of which emphasize the holiness of God and provide a way to set Israel apart as holy. We are going to spend five lessons on Leviticus. Today I am going to say a bit about the ritual sections at the beginning and end of the book. In the second lesson, I will address both of the priesthood sections. Then for the third and fourth lessons, I will address the two purity code sections separately, one after the other. And in our final lesson we consider the Day of Atonement. So, that's our plan.

Set apart as Holy

Before I address the ritual sections, I have one more reason to study Leviticus. Leviticus challenges us to resist the powerful pull to be conformed to our culture.

The purpose of Leviticus is not only to set up a way of approach that is holy. The Levitical code is also intended to transform the thought and behavior of the Israelites. If they are going to live out their purpose as a kingdom of priests and if they are going to grow in relationship with God, then their worldview must undergo transformation. And we have already gotten a glimpse into how hard that is going to be for the Israelites. The experience of God on Mount Sinai and the teaching directly from God from Mount Sinai did not root Egypt out of Israel. They still behaved out of the worldview that they brought with them from Egypt when they created the golden idol and said, "Here, this is Yahweh." And here is a great worry, that even if the thinking and behavior of Egypt does get rooted out, the Israelites will only replace it with the thinking and behavior of the land they are going into, of Canaan. Israel needs not only to root out what is wrong, Israel needs her own culture, a culture that is patterned after the truth of God.

This is one of the most important reasons for us to study Leviticus. All the rituals, the whole priesthood, all the purity laws, all of it together is meant to transform the thinking and behavior of the Israelites from a pagan worldview to a godly worldview. Who is God? Who are we? What's our mission? God knows that all people, everywhere are drawn like a magnet away from true worship to false worship. We need structures to help us, to help guide us towards what God is really like, towards what we are really like, towards what our purpose is. The compass of our hearts is broken. Our souls do not point to true north. It's constantly turning away from God. We turn from him, like the nations at Babel, determined to make a name for ourselves, to define our own gods, and create our own meaning. The society of man applies constant pressure on anyone who would follow God,

pressure to be conformed into the pattern of the world. The Levitical code exists to transform people into a pattern that is in line with the heart of God. God is establishing a new kind of culture.

Understanding how God intended the Levitical code to mold the thinking and behavior of the Israelites gives us principles to consider as we seek to develop Christian communities committed to transformation in holiness. How do we resist that pull of society, the pressure to make our Christianity more acceptable, more in line modern sensibilities, values, and behaviors? There is constant pressure to conform. Leviticus challenges to ask what rituals, what priestly leadership, what purity code do we have in place to help us resist that pressure.

We are a couple of weeks past Easter. In the United States newspapers tend to get a little spiritual at this time of year. Albert Mohler pointed out two articles in the *New York Times* that exemplify the work of society to mold Christianity into its own image. The first article is from April 19 by Jenna Wortham in the Style Section. She celebrates Easter as a worship of Spring. She makes this conclusion.

Our city has made this day into one of collective worship. The traditions remain the same: Those who are religious head to services and a meal. Those of us who aren't head to brunch, or maybe the park, sporting a freshly pressed suit, an elaborate hat, a big bow, a bright lip, a colorful jumpsuit or one of those delicate beaded Loeffler Randall bags that have suddenly and mysteriously become as ubiquitous as the cherry blossom trees in Brooklyn.

So, whether you go to church or brunch, it is all the same. There is really no difference. No one is set apart as holy. We are all worshippers, we are all holy no matter what we do.

It gets worse. The next day, on April 20, columnist Nicholas Kristof interviewed Serene Jones, a Protestant Minister and President of Union Theological Seminary. Here is a selection from that interview.

Kristof asked, "Isn't a Christianity without a physical resurrection less powerful and awesome? When the message is about love, that's less religion, more philosophy."

Jones responded, "For me, the message of Easter is that love is stronger than life or death. That's a much more awesome claim than that they put Jesus in the tomb and three days later he wasn't there. For Christians for whom the physical resurrection becomes a sort of obsession, that seems to me to be a pretty wobbly faith. What if tomorrow someone found the body of Jesus still in the tomb? Would that then mean that Christianity was a lie? No, faith is stronger than that."

Kristof then asks, "What about other miracles of the New Testament? Say, the virgin birth?"

Jones answers, "I find the virgin birth a bizarre claim. It has nothing to do with Jesus' message. The virgin birth only becomes important if you have a theology in which sexuality is considered sinful. It also promotes this notion that the pure, untouched female body is the best body, and that idea has led to centuries of oppressing women."

Kristof then asks, "What happens when we die?"

Jones responds, "I don't know! There may be something, there may be nothing. My faith is not tied to some divine promise about the afterlife."

Here is a woman who calls herself a Protestant Christian Minister and holds the position of theological seminary president, and she is denying the physical resurrection of Jesus Christ, twisting the virgin birth, and telling us no one knows if there is an afterlife. For her, if there is holiness, if there is a being set apart, it is certainly not described in the text of the Bible, at least not without a lot of revision. She models for us the spirit of religious accommodation. We are not to be set apart. We are to conform, to fit in with society.

And Jesus knew this would be a problem for New Covenant believers. He prayed this for his disciples in John 17:19 the night of his arrest,

¹⁵ I do not ask You to take them out of the world, but to keep them from the evil *one*. ¹⁶ They are not of the world, even as I am not of the world. ¹⁷ Sanctify them in the truth; Your word is truth. ¹⁸ As You sent Me into the world, I also have sent them into the world. ¹⁹ For their sakes I sanctify Myself, that they themselves also may be sanctified in truth.

Jesus declares that his followers are not of this world, but he has sent them to live in the world. And Jesus prays for God to sanctify his disciples by his truth. Sanctify means to set apart, to be made holy. The English word sanctify does not sound a lot like the word holy but in the Greek and in the Hebrew and in a lot of languages, sanctify and holy come from the same root word. To sanctify someone is to make them holy. And to holy is both to be set apart for special use and to be made clean for that use. We are to be set apart and made clean through the truth of God's word. That was also a major goal of Leviticus. God used ritual and the priesthood and the purity laws to set Israel apart to be clean and useful for relationship and for service.

I am not going to advocate a return to the Levitical code. God designed that covenant for them, and he has designed a New Covenant for us. The primary source for understanding New Covenant holiness is the New Testament, not the Old Testament. But studying Leviticus can challenge our thinking. Looking at their covenant may help us to understand our covenant with a new and enriched perspective.

So, let's consider how holiness worked in Leviticus, starting with the rituals sections in the first seven chapters and the last five chapters.

The Ritual Sections of Leviticus

Leviticus starts with these words in 1:1-3.

¹ Then the LORD called to Moses and spoke to him from the tent of meeting, saying, ² "Speak to the sons of Israel and say to them, 'When any man of you brings an offering to the LORD, you shall bring your offering of animals from the herd or the flock. ³ 'If his offering is a burnt offering from the herd, he shall offer it, a male without defect; he shall offer it at the doorway of the tent of meeting, that he may be accepted before the LORD.

The next seven chapters are all about details of sacrifice. And that makes a rough start to the book. We get hardly any explanation about the meaning or symbolism of the sacrifices. We just get the details of what animal to give, how to slaughter it, who gets to eat it. And it seems like a lot of detail.

At the end of the book we going to get a little more variety, but still a lot of detail about the ritual days and rules of redemption and rules for vows, and so on. So, this section is a little more interesting, there is a little more going on than the beginning which is all about sacrifice, but still, there is very little commentary and very little narrative.

To get into these sections, we need to follow the same principle for getting into the tabernacle detail in Exodus. We need to imagine ourselves offering the sacrifices, celebrating the festivals and practicing redemption or fulfilling a vow. We need to somehow get into it experientially, a little emotionally, and above all, we need to think about why we would do this. What would this mean for me if I was doing this? What would God want it to mean for me? Maybe that is even better.

I guess that the Israelites had some motivation. Things went terribly wrong when they sought to mold god into an image of their own liking. And I assume they would be asking, what are we supposed to do? What kind of worship does he want? No idol, that's for sure. What else? What about sacrifice? Is that the same as in Egypt or is that completely different, too.

I assume many Israelites would have been motivated by fear out of doing something wrong. So, they want to know what they are supposed to do. I imagine there were others who were motivated by a hope of blessing. If we satisfy God, he said he was going to give us good things. But I imagine there were some motivated by a desire to know God and be in relationship with him.

As we imagine performing sacrifice or celebrating the feasts or completing a vow, we can imagine too how we might be feeling. We can imagine obedience out of fear. We can imagine obedience out of blessing. We can imagine obedience of truly wanting to know God, that “I am offering this sacrifice God, because I truly want to know you. I want to get sin out of the way, or I want to give gratitude to you. I am making a vow because I really want to focus on you.” We could probably also imagine obedience out of boredom because it is some ritual that you have always had to do, and you are just having to do it over again but that would come later. For now, at least, its all new to them. So, I don’t think there is much boredom, yet.

If you had been there, when Moses began to read out to everyone the laws, and it started right away, chapter 1, verse 1, with rules for sacrifice, you would not have been surprised at all. In fact, Moses would have been meeting a felt need. You expected to sacrifice, so you want to know how to do it. You find it an interesting way to start the rule book. You are getting the useful kind of information you were hoping for. And you might be concerned though at how little detail Moses was giving you. You’ve probably got have 50 unanswered questions about how this is supposed to happen.

That’s the same problem we had with the tabernacle. From our perspective, we have no plan to do any of this. We are trying to pay close attention just in case there is any theological point or narrative detail tucked away in there somewhere, but our minds start to wander pretty quickly. It’s all different when you are going to have to step out in front of a crowd and be expected to know exactly what to do and what to say.

I remember the first time, I had to serve in a youth lovefeast. The details of how to serve had never crossed my mind, but I got nervous pretty quickly when it was my turn. I guess I better explain what a lovefeast is. Don’t worry, the term is used in the Bible in Jude 12. Though it is not quite the same thing. I grew up in the Moravian Church, a protestant denomination started in Czech, in Bohemia, which was renewed in Germany before showing up in North Carolina. And we’ve got some unique traditions in our church. For Easter, for example, if we were in the band, we had a German brass band, we got up early morning hours and drove around town, stopping at certain spots to play songs and wake people up to celebrate the resurrection of Jesus. We then had a sunrise service at one church and a later morning service at another church. We needed two bands because we would start the service inside the church and then all stroll over to the graveyard to finish the service. And one band would lead, and they played the first stanza of a hymn. Then the other band bringing up the rear, would play the second stanza, and it would go back and forth and everybody else is walking in between. And it took quite a bit of coordination between the bands and the choir and the congregation and the minister. So, there was quite a bit of detail to it.

But I am supposed to be talking about the lovefeast. Okay, Christmas lovefeast took even more coordination. So, at a lovefeast service everyone is given a mug of coffee and a simple bun to eat, and it symbolizes a fellowship meal. So, in the New Testament Acts very often believers would gather together, and they would have a meal that would include the Lord’s supper. So, for us the lovefeast is not the Lord’s supper. It is something else. We have the normal Lord’s supper with wine and bread. This is something different. This is a bun and coffee. It’s a lovefeast. And the servers all marched into the sanctuary in very orderly lines. And they knew exactly where to stop and which rows of people they were to cover. And the coffee mugs, they came in carried by a man on a wooden tray with a woman server to hand them out. And the handles of the mugs all had to point the same way. And the guy better have them pointing at the woman so she can easily pick them up off the tray and hand them down the row. And at Christmas we served 700 people in just a few minutes. And then everybody was out again until it was time to come back in and collect the coffee mugs. And there was singing and preaching all that going on in between. And then back in again to hand out lighted candles. So, the men are coming in with beeswax candles that are all already lit. And you have to move quickly because that beeswax burns down fast, so the coordination needed to be just right. And the main concern of the parents growing up was that none of their kids would light the hair of

the woman in front of them on fire. Which was especially dangerous in the big hair years of the 80s. Hair spray being very flammable. Talk about fire on a bush. So, that's Christmas.

And then Thanksgiving service had its particular requirements. So, we had a Thanksgiving Eve time at church. And there was a display of pumpkins and a cornucopia and sheaves of corn. And we brought food, usually canned goods to symbolize gratitude to God. And it was all then given to a local food bank. So, you wanted mom to remember that everybody was supposed to bring the food. And she usually did.

And that may seem like a lot of detail to you. But I promise you, it's not. If you are going to help serve at the lovefeast you need a lot more than that. If you are a woman, you better not take the mugs off all one side of the tray because then the man gets lopsided, and it all starts to spill. So, comparing these three festivals of Easter, Christmas, and Thanksgiving to the three main Jewish feasts in Leviticus, Passover, Weeks and Booths, I have no idea how they knew what they were supposed to do. We would need a small book to describe all the details of these Moravian ceremonies just to make sure everybody knows where they were supposed to stand. We only get 44 verses for all the feasts of Israel, not just the three, but there are more than that. It is really not much detail. It is the same with the sacrifices. It is seven chapters, yes, but it is not that much detail if you have to stand up there and do it.

So, I think we may need to rethink our understanding of what it was like to live under Mosaic law. There were rules about days and food and festivals and washings and different life events and sickness and moral behavior. But how often are you sick and how often do you have mold in the wall of your house? How often do you sacrifice? The sabbath is only once a week, and you do not worry about the details of the feast days until the time of the year comes. So, I imagine that a young father would be nervous the first few times he has to step forward and sacrifice. But after a couple of years it becomes basically second nature. You do not need to read it any more. You know what is going on. You know the details.

So, what looks like a lot of details in Leviticus is spread out over the week and throughout the year. And traditions may have added up a lot more laws by the time of Jesus. But during the time of Moses, just looking at Leviticus and Exodus and Deuteronomy, there is not really an overbearing amount of detail to follow. It may have been a bit overwhelming at first, as Israel is coming out of Egypt. There are coming out of a very different culture. And so, it is not second nature, yet. They have a lot to learn. But once you begin to practice it, you realize, "Wow, there is not really that much here. We are going to have to make up some of this as we go along. How do you really sacrifice? How do you kill the sheep?"

The details of the rituals and the purity laws are not to take over every aspect and control every aspect of Jewish life. The rituals ordered life, and they reminded the Israelites of truths about God and about their history with God. But the danger was probably less to do with being overwhelmed with detail and more with doing everything by rote once they got going. You can imagine that that is the real danger. That is becomes second nature. They know what to wash. They know what not to eat. You can't buy it in Israel anyway. It's like going to Istanbul. You can't get pork on your pizza even if you are at Pizza hut. It's not that problem. The culture knows how it is supposed to live. So, the greater danger, I think was not the overwhelming detail, but getting used to the detail and not engaging with the heart and with the mind. It would become very easy to forget what the purpose is.

If you keep your mind on the purpose, I imagine offering sacrifice to be a powerful, meaningful experience. So, let's go over that in detail a little bit more. Let's go over the sacrifices in chapters 1-7 just to give us an idea. And we will consider the types of sacrifices, the procedures for sacrifice, and the functions of the sacrifices.

Five types of sacrifice⁶

There are five types of sacrifices in Leviticus 1-7. The text gives us two separate lists. It is the same five sacrifices in both lists. The first is in 1:2-6:7. That lists gives the regulations for the people who are offering the sacrifice. The second list is in 6:8-7:21 and that is where we find out what part goes to the priest, what part goes to God, and what part can the worshipper eat.

Regulations for the people

Burnt offering 1:2-17

Grain offering 2:1-16

Peace offering 3:1-17

Purification offering 4:1-5:13

Reparation offering 5:14-6:7

Regulations for the priests

Burnt offering 6:8-13

Grain offering 6:14-23

Purification offering 6:24-30

Reparation offering 7:1-10

Peace offering 7:11-21

The lists are not in the same order, probably because the first list groups together the three sacrifices said to produce a soothing aroma to the Lord. While the second list orders the offerings according to the holiness of the meat, starting with the burnt offering which is completely given over to God and ending with the peace offering which mostly goes to non-priests. It goes to the people who brought it to worship.

Common procedures for the sacrifices

Considering the procedure for sacrifices, there were several common procedures for all sacrifices.

1. First, all of the sacrifices except the grain offering involve meat.
2. Second, an individual brought his sacrifice to the tabernacle courtyard.
3. Third, the worshipper laid a hand on the animal's head before the slaughtering.
4. Fourth, the blood of the animal was collected by the priest and usually sprinkled on the side of the altar (for purification offerings some blood was put to a special use).
5. Fifth, the whole animal, or selected parts, was placed on the altar to be consumed by fire.
6. Sixth, usually the priests consumed any meat that was not consumed by the fire.

So, who do you think killed the animal before it was offered? Do you think it was the priest on duty?

So, let's read again from the first few verses of Leviticus, this is 1:3-5.

³ If his offering is a burnt offering from the herd, he shall offer it, a male without defect; he shall offer it at the doorway of the tent of meeting, that he may be accepted before the LORD. ⁴ He shall lay his hand on the head of the burnt offering, that it may be accepted for him to make atonement on his behalf. ⁵ He shall slay the young bull before the LORD; and Aaron's sons the priests shall offer up the blood and sprinkle the blood around on the altar that is at the doorway of the tent of meeting. ⁶ He shall then skin the burnt offering and cut it into its pieces.

It's not the priest, is it? The worshipper slays the animal. He selects it from his own herd. He brings it to the tabernacle. He lays his hands on it, which symbolically transferring his own sin onto the animal. And then he kills it. The priest takes some of the blood to sprinkle on the altar. But the worshiper is not finished, yet. It is his job to skin the animal and then butcher it. It is then that the priests take the pieces of the animal to the altar. This is not just for the burnt offering. It is the same for the peace offering in 3:2 and for the purification offering in 4:29. The ritual involves the worshipper fully in the process. It is not like going to the supermarket to buy your hamburger wrapped in plastic that was cut up by somebody else. The normal person shares in the experience of life and death when he comes to offer the sacrifice. It is powerful imagery. It is powerful experience.

⁶ Alexander, *From Paradise to the Promised Land*, 2002.

And we should also note that the majority of the meat of the offerings is eaten. It is not wasted. It is eaten either by the priests or by the worshippers. And the skin is also given as an offering to the priests. The meat and skin were not wasted. The sacrifices of Israel are one of the ways that God supports the priests.

So, those are the types of sacrifice and the some of the procedures of sacrifice, and now let's consider some of the functions of sacrifice, because each of the sacrifices served a special function.

Specialized functions for the sacrifices

1. Burnt offering

First, we have the burnt offering. The burnt offering, as suggested by the name, is consumed totally by the fire. None of it is eaten. It is a complete giving over. Leviticus 1:4 indicates that this offering is especially to make atonement, a term that probably includes both the idea of covering over sin and the idea of making a ransom or a payment for sin. In the case of the burnt offering where the sacrifice is given wholly over to the Lord, resulting in a pleasing aroma, the idea of ransom stands out more than the idea of covering. The total destruction of the sacrifice by fire is affirming the idea of substitutionary atonement. The animal is standing in place, is a substitute for the worshipper.

2. Grain offering

For the grain offering, the Hebrew word for grain offering *mincha* is translated elsewhere as tribute. A tribute is a payment made by a lesser king to a greater king. And presumably this offering was made to acknowledge the sovereignty of God and was received by the priests as his representative. Only a small portion was burnt on the altar. But the worshipper never ate any of the remainder. It is a gift completely given over to God received by the priests.

3. Peace offering

The peace offering might be offered as an offering of thanksgiving or as a freewill gift or as the result of a vow. And though some parts of the peace offering were burnt on the altar to God and other parts were given to the priests, most of the peace offering was eaten by the worshipper and by his family. So, this offering has also been called a fellowship offering to emphasize that the worshippers, in eating the sacrifice, are enjoying a meal of fellowship with the Lord.

4. Purification offering

The purification offering is sometimes called sin offering because the word used for the offering can be translated as sin. Calling it a purification offering makes the purpose clearer. If the anointed priest or the whole community of Israel sinned unintentionally the blood of the purification offering was placed on the horns of the incense altar which stood inside the holy place. So, that is if it's the anointed priest or the whole community. If a leader or individual Israelite sinned unintentionally then the blood was put on the altar in the courtyard. And putting the blood on the altar shows that the purification offering was not intended to cleanse the sinner, that was more the role of the burnt offering for atonement, but the purification offering was to wash away the stain on the land or on the community which was brought about by the sin of the sinner.

5. Reparation offering

And then finally, we have the reparation offering. And it is sometimes translated as guilt offering but the Hebrew can mean reparation or compensation. And that idea of reparation is seen in Leviticus 6:5. Anyone who steals something or gains something by extortion or the perversion of justice is to restore back to the victim whatever was taken, adding an additional one-fifth of the price. And the

guilty person is also to present the guilt or reparation offering to the Lord. Two important points are made here. First, a principle of Israelite law is restoration of relationship. For restoration to happen, the victim needs to feel as though they have been justly compensated, and the perpetrator needs a way to show they have paid a satisfactory debt. And that's not a bad principle for any justice system. Second, we see that sin against another member of society is also sin against God. Restoration with the victim is not enough to restore a person into covenant community. Covenant community at its base is a community defined by covenant with Yahweh. So, restoration must be made with him as well. Paying back more than what was stolen restores human relationship. The reparation offering restores divine relationship.

For all the detail we get in the Bible, we do not get much description about actual worship experiences, about people putting this into practice, and what it felt like. So, here is an example, it is a much later example, but it is a biblical example, from the life of Hezekiah who brought about reforms after the reign of his pagan father Ahaz. Speaking to the priests in 2 Chronicles 29:10-11 Hezekiah says this,

¹⁰ Now it is in my heart to make a covenant with the LORD God of Israel, that His burning anger may turn away from us. ¹¹ My sons, do not be negligent now, for the LORD has chosen you to stand before Him, to minister to Him, and to be His ministers and burn incense.

Then we get description of a ritual Hezekiah had come up with for the cleansing of the temple after the idolatry of his father. Here we get sacrifice and music combined under the leadership of a king who truly sought after the heart of God. I'll read the whole passage. This is 2 Chronicles 29:20-29.

²⁰ Then King Hezekiah arose early and assembled the princes of the city and went up to the house of the LORD. ²¹ They brought seven bulls, seven rams, seven lambs and seven male goats for a sin offering for the kingdom, the sanctuary, and Judah. And he ordered the priests, the sons of Aaron, to offer *them* on the altar of the LORD. ²² So they slaughtered the bulls, and the priests took the blood and sprinkled it on the altar. They also slaughtered the rams and sprinkled the blood on the altar; they slaughtered the lambs also and sprinkled the blood on the altar. ²³ Then they brought the male goats of the sin offering before the king and the assembly, and they laid their hands on them. ²⁴ The priests slaughtered them and purged the altar with their blood to atone for all Israel, for the king ordered the burnt offering and the sin offering for all Israel. ²⁵ He then stationed the Levites in the house of the LORD with cymbals, with harps and with lyres, according to the command of David and of Gad the king's seer, and of Nathan the prophet; for the command was from the LORD through His prophets. ²⁶ The Levites stood with the *musical* instruments of David, and the priests with the trumpets. ²⁷ Then Hezekiah gave the order to offer the burnt offering on the altar. When the burnt offering began, the song to the LORD also began with the trumpets, *accompanied* by the instruments of David, king of Israel. ²⁸ While the whole assembly worshiped, the singers also sang and the trumpets sounded; all this *continued* until the burnt offering was finished. ²⁹ Now at the completion of the burnt offerings, the king and all who were present with him bowed down and worshiped.

That seems to me the ritual of the Law done right. The Levitical rituals were instituted to help Israelites fix their eyes on God, with the desire to covenant with him from the heart, that they would confess sin and be freed from the guilt of sin, that they would sing and worship and bow down.

God says to the Israelites in Leviticus 26:11–13, if you keep ways, I will bless you,

¹¹ Moreover, I will make My dwelling among you, and My soul will not reject you. ¹² I will also walk among you and be your God, and you shall be My people. ¹³ I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt so that *you* would not be their slaves, and I broke the bars of your yoke and made you walk erect.

How do our rituals and practices as New Covenant believers set us apart as holy, leading us to confess our sin, to let it go, sing, and worship, and bow down? And how do our rituals and practices help transform our thinking and our behavior? That's the challenge for us from Leviticus. Are we setting ourselves apart as holy and are our rituals and our practices helping us to do that? Though Paul's exhortation in Romans 12:1-2 is grounded in the wonderful new covenant vision of Romans 1-11, the language seems to come right out of Leviticus. Let's close with this, Romans 12:1-2.

¹ Therefore I urge you, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, *which is* your spiritual service of worship. ² And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect.

Reflection Questions

1. What stands out to you as you read Leviticus 1:1-9 and 6:1-11? What do you notice as interesting or important or strange or confusing? What questions come to mind?
2. Consider just one of the required sacrifices, maybe the burnt offering in 1:1-9, and come up with at least three details not mentioned. If you planned to make this sacrifice, what are three questions not covered in the text that you would ask a priest to help you understand what you were expected to do?
3. What are some of the spiritual benefits that Israelites may have received through the experience of sacrifice?
4. What stands out to you as you read about the laws concerning the feasts in Leviticus 23?
5. Consider just one of the assigned feasts and come up with at least three details not mentioned. If you planned to celebrate this feast, what are three questions not covered in the text that you would ask to help you understand what you were expected to do?
6. What are some of the truths impressed on the Israelites through offering sacrifice and through the celebration of the feasts?
7. Which of the offerings in Leviticus do you think fits best with the idea of a living sacrifice in Romans 12:1? Do you think Paul was pointing towards any one sacrifice in particular?

Lesson 15: Leviticus 8-10 and 21-22 Priesthood

Introduction

Leviticus: Kingdom Requirements

Key Passage: 19:2

| 1-7 | 8-10 | 11-15 | 16-17 | 18-20 | 21-22 | 23-27 |
|------------|--------------|---------------------------|--------------|----------------------|------------|----------------------|
| Ritual | Priesthood | Purity | Atonement | Purity | Priesthood | Ritual |
| Sacrifices | Consecration | Ceremonial
cleanliness | Substitution | Moral
cleanliness | Standards | Festivals,
etc... |

Leviticus is a book of Kingdom requirements, the dos and don'ts of the Mosaic Covenant organized in the shape of the lamp in the holy place of the tabernacle, meaning it is a seven-part chiasm. The sections on either end teach us ritual requirements, mostly how to sacrifice and the rules of the holy festivals. Moving inward, the second pair of sections on each end teach about the priesthood. The third pair of sections on each end teach purity requirements. And in the very middle, we have the Day of Atonement.

In our last lesson, along with an overview of Leviticus, I addressed the ritual sections. In this lesson, we consider the priesthood. In doing that, we also come face to face with one of those difficult passages in the Law of Moses when God consumes with fire the two sons of Aaron. How do we understand the severity of God in some his punishments?

The Levitical priesthood under Aaron has already begun to be established in the earlier books of the Torah in the context of the narrative. Back in Genesis, Simeon and Levi were the two brothers who avenged the rape of their sister by tricking the men of Shechem to be circumcised and then attacking them in their weakened state. It is terrible abuse of the covenant sign. God's anger at the two brother comes out in the prophetic blessing section of Genesis 49. They are grouped together for the blessing. And the prophecy starts this way in verse 5, "Simeon and Levi are brothers; Their swords are implements of violence." The prophecy ends in verse 7 with this, "Cursed be their anger, for it is fierce; And their wrath, for it is cruel. I will disperse them in Jacob, and scatter them in Israel." That prophecy is going to become true it two very different ways. Simeon is going to be allotted land in the very middle of the tribe of Judah, surrounded by Judah, and after the book of Judges, Simeon as a tribe basically fades away. And it just doesn't get mentioned any more. When we talk about the Southern Kingdom of Judah, we talk about Judah, and we talk about Benjamin, but we never mention Simeon. They have been scattered and dispersed among the tribes. Levi also gets scattered and dispersed but in a very different way. They become the tribe of priests. They are given cities throughout the land, but they are not given any allotment of their own. They are set apart as for special use.

The book of Exodus brings the focus back on Levi, with Moses, the most famous Levite of all, and with Aaron the brother of Moses. Aaron was the one who went out to meet Moses when he arrived back in Egypt after 40 years in Midian. Aaron then went with Moses to the elders of Israel to support Moses in the vision from the Lord to free Israel. They were inseparable throughout the ten-plague power struggle with Pharaoh. And during the telling of that story, just as the struggle with Pharaoh is getting underway in chapter 6, Moses inserted a genealogy list. And the list causes a pause in the narrative at the low point of the struggle. It is one of those times that you get to something in the Bible, and you ask, "Why is this here?" Pharaoh had pushed back hard against Moses' original request. And the exciting vision of freedom quickly turned to more pain and suffering for the Israelites. The people turn against Moses, and Moses loses hope. But in Exodus 6:1-13, God speaks words of encouragement to strengthen Moses and Aaron, giving them resolve to press back against Pharaoh, to keep going, in spite of his resistance and in spite of the loss of support from fellow Israelites. God concludes that section of encouragement with this reaffirmation of their leadership, this is Exodus 6:13, "Then the LORD spoke to Moses and to Aaron, and gave them a charge to the

sons of Israel and to Pharaoh king of Egypt, to bring the sons of Israel out of the land of Egypt.” That’s then when we get the genealogy, right after this charge in the middle of the narrative. And at first, the genealogy looks to be a list of all the elders from each of the twelve tribes, but once we come to Levi, we realize it is really all about Aaron and Moses. The first verse talks about the heads of Reuben first-born, that makes sense, second verse, Simeon, that makes sense. Then we are going to expect Levi, but it is not going to be anybody else. It is going to stay just with Levi. And he does not get one verse, Levi gets 11 verses. None of the other tribes are going to be mentioned. And the eleven verses dedicated to Levi tell us about his three sons and trace the lineage down to Moses and Aaron, and then conclude this way in 6:26-27,

²⁶ It was *the same* Aaron and Moses to whom the LORD said, “Bring out the sons of Israel from the land of Egypt according to their hosts.” ²⁷ They were the ones who spoke to Pharaoh king of Egypt about bringing out the sons of Israel from Egypt; it was *the same* Moses and Aaron.

It is kind of odd. We know it is Moses and Aaron. We are in the middle of the story about Moses and Aaron. So, what is this genealogical record doing here? It is affirming Moses and Aaron, sons of Levi, as rightful leaders of Israel, while also introducing to us the sons of Aaron who are going to form the first priesthood. The genealogy is important, because even though all Levites are set apart for the service of the tabernacle, not all Levites are to serve as priests. The line of Aaron is being set apart as special from the other Levites. And it is here in Exodus that we first get mention of his four sons, Nadab, Abihu, Eleazar, and Ithamar. This is the first family of the priesthood for Israel. Moses is the covenant mediator prophet. Miriam, his sister, is a prophetess. While Aaron and his four sons are the initial priesthood. Later in the book of Exodus in chapter 32, there is a turning point for the tribe of Levi. Up until this point they are sort of under the same blessing/curse as Simeon. But after the sin of the golden calf, even though Aaron was complicit along with all of Israel, it was the tribe of Levi that alone stood with Moses when he came down from the mountain and confronted the nation.

Now we are in Leviticus, and chapters 8-10 describe the consecration of Aaron and his sons. Up till now, Moses has done all the leading, including serving as a priest. For example, it was back on Mt. Sinai Moses was the one who took the blood of the sacrifice when covenant was cut with Israel, and he sprinkled that blood on the altar, and he sprinkled that blood on the people. Moses was serving as priest. But Moses’ priestly role was only intended to be a temporary function by God until he gave instructions for the makeup of the ongoing priesthood. And then the priesthood was going to shift to Aaron. God has now given those requirements, and he has designating Aaron and his sons as the line of the priests. And so, it is time for consecration.

The consecration of Aaron and his sons is the moment of transition of all priestly responsibility from Moses to Aaron. From here on out it is going to be Aaron and his sons who perform the duties of priests. And so, they dress in the priestly garments, and several sacrifices are made to ritually purify the altar and to purify Aaron and his sons. And they are commanded to remain in the tabernacle tent for 7 days, which they do. Then they will come out and make sacrifice for all of Israel. And that completes the transition. Moses facilitated the sacrifices for Aaron and his sons, now Moses has stepped aside, and Aaron makes sacrifice for the people as his first act in the role of high priest.

God makes the moment very memorable. Previously, God had affirmed Moses through fire on the mountain and by speaking out the ten commandments and by causing his radiance to shine on the face of Moses. God also chooses now to act with power to affirm Aaron as his priest. Listen to how God completes the ceremony of atonement for the people in Leviticus 9:22-24,

²² Then Aaron lifted up his hands toward the people and blessed them, and he stepped down after making the sin offering and the burnt offering and the peace offerings. ²³ Moses and Aaron went into the tent of meeting. When they came out and blessed the people, the glory of the LORD appeared to all the people. ²⁴ Then fire came out from before the LORD and consumed the burnt offering and the portions of fat on the altar; and when all the people saw *it*, they shouted and fell on their faces.

It is glorious. But tragically, really tragically, this glorious beginning of the priesthood is immediately turned sour. We read about it in the very next verses. This is 10:1-3.

¹ Now Nadab and Abihu, the sons of Aaron, took their respective firepans, and after putting fire in them, placed incense on it and offered strange fire before the LORD, which He had not commanded them. ² And fire came out from the presence of the LORD and consumed them, and they died before the LORD. ³ Then Moses said to Aaron, "It is what the LORD spoke, saying, 'By those who come near Me I will be treated as holy, And before all the people I will be honored.'" So Aaron, therefore, kept silent.

Wow. Aaron's own sons, Moses' nephews, Nadab and Abihu improvised a little with incense in the holy place and fire comes from the LORD, just as it had on the burnt offering a moment before and consumes them. What's going on here? How is this the same God our Lord Jesus Christ, who eats with sinners and outcasts, who is compassionate and gracious? God had told Moses of the danger of his holiness, but he also proclaimed himself gracious and compassionate and slow to anger, full of lovingkindness and truth. Is this how it is going to be with God? Is God so severe in his wrath against those who break his commands? Is this what it is going to be like to be an Israelite, living a life of fear, not knowing when you will step out of line and get struck down by fire?

This is not the only example of God's severity in the Pentateuch. There are only two narrative sections in Leviticus. And both of them have such a story. This is the priesthood section. There is another story in the second ritual section at the end of the book. Leviticus 24:10-23 tells of a man who blasphemes the name of God. And God commands Moses to have him stoned to death. There is another incident in Numbers 15:32-36 where a man goes out to pick up sticks on the Sabbath. He is also stoned to death. What is the right way to approach these stories? How should we consider them?

My Heart Attitude Towards The Hard Passages of Scripture

One move a lot of people make is to disassociate these stories from the truth revealed in Jesus as belonging to the God of a different era. This is the God of Moses, not the God of Jesus. But that kind of thinking immediately falls apart. Ananias and Saphira are struck down dead for lying in Acts 5 after the resurrection of Jesus and the beginning of the church by the God of the New Covenant. You get to the book of Revelation and it describes for us the Lamb of God returning in glory on a white horse bearing a sword which he will use to slay the armies of the earth. The Lamb is also the Lion. There may be a different tone to the New Covenant. I think there is. But we do not explain the newness of the New Covenant by attributing to God a split personality or by ignoring the wrathful parts of the New Testament. So, we don't create a God of wrath and judgment in the Old Covenant and a God of peace and love and grace in the New Covenant. We need to consider more thoughtfully what is going on here, not only to understand the Old Covenant but also to understand our New Covenant better. Wrath and justice belong to both covenants just as love and mercy belong to both covenants because these are attributes of God, and he is the same yesterday and today and forever.

I think it is right to be shocked or disturbed by the severity of God here in these instances. There is a potential problem here. How can a God of love and grace demand death for such things as these, blasphemy and Sabbath breaking and innovation in worship? What kind of religion is this? It is not wrong to be emotionally disturbed by the stories. Personally, I think there is a problem if we are not disturbed when we talk about the wrath of God. How can we read of the fiery death of Moses' sons and not be a bit shaken? But then what do we do with that? Where do I go in my mind and in my heart when I am troubled by Scripture? Do I believe that my view of sin, my view of wrath, my view of what is right and just and pure is actually right and accurate? Do I trust in my perspective of justice and fairness? Do I believe that my sense of compassion is greater than God's sense of compassion? When I am saying, "God this is not compassionate. You are not compassionate enough." What am I really saying?

So, when passages like this unsettle me, I do not want to allow those feelings to lead me into an attitude where I am ultimately placing myself in judgment over the Word of God and over God

himself as if I believe in my own heart and my own character enough to say that I know justice better than God knows justice. I know compassion better than God knows compassion. That is absolutely not true. I know God is good. I know God is compassionate. I know God is holy and just. And I know that something is skewed out of place in my own heart. I see in my daily dealings with people that I am not that gracious. I am more likely to be sentimental a movie than I am to be compassionate at a person in need. I also know that I do not understand how deeply sin offends the goodness of God. I am much more likely to want revenge than to want righteous justice. So, when I come to passages of Scripture like this, I need to come humbly, recognizing that my own perspective and heart and emotions are not in line always with what is right. And I need to ask two basic questions. (1) what am I not understanding about the text? Am I getting it wrong? Am I not seeing something here? And (2) what am I not understanding about the character of God? I want to come to the Scripture with the awareness that God is more righteous, mysterious, and dangerous than I realize, while at the same time he is more loving, compassionate, and gracious than I realize. I want to humble myself before the hard texts of Scripture. I want to address them intellectually and emotionally.

And in the end, I do not have to understand it. If I don't get it, I don't get it. I do not have to make up an answer. Some problems just remain. But I do want to try. I want to try to understand God and to try to understand truth. So, let's do that. Let's try to understand a little better what is going on here. Why does God take the lives of Nadab and Abihu?

The Responsibilities of the Levitical Priesthood

We need to consider the responsibilities of the Levitical priesthood. God set the Levites apart from the rest of the tribes of Israel for particular service. We have been building up to that in Genesis and Exodus and Leviticus. We will be told explicitly that God set Levi aside for a special purpose in Numbers 3:1-13 and Deuteronomy 10:6-9. In Numbers 3, God is going to tell Moses that all the first-born sons of all the tribes of Israel belong to him because he spared their lives during the Passover of Egypt when he put to death the sons of Egypt. God then allows a symbolic buying back of each first-born son of Israel. They are redeemed from God, bought back. And the price of that redemption for one first-born son of Israel is one Levite. So, all of the Levites are taken as a symbolic payment for all the first-born sons of Israel. The Levites have this special identity. They are taken by God as payment for Israel, and then they are set aside for a special purpose. And these are the responsibilities of a special group of Levites who are the priests, the sons of Aaron. These are their responsibilities.

- (1) First, they are to perform the service of the tabernacle. They prepare the bread, the lamp, and the incense in the holy place. They preside over the daily rituals, the sacrifices brought by the common people and the ceremonies of the feast days.
- (2) Second, the priests teach the law, as Moses says here in Leviticus 10:11, they are to keep themselves from strong drink, "so as to teach the sons of Israel all the statutes which the LORD has spoken to them through Moses."
- (3) Third, they are to serve as mediators between God and the Israelites, reminding the people of the separation between the holiness of God and the sinfulness of man. This is the language of Leviticus 10:10, "they are to make a distinction between the holy and the profane, between the clean and the unclean." The priests are not more spiritual or more holy in character or in soul as human beings. They are more holy symbolically. For this reason, though Israelites are involved in bringing sacrifice to the tabernacle and even in killing the animal they bring, they cannot approach the altar. The priests must take over at the entryway of the tabernacle, serving as mediators between the people who stand outside and God who dwells in the Holy of Holies.
- (4) Fourth, the priests are to facilitate the purity laws that have to do with cleanliness and food and ritual and sickness. The priests apply the laws of cleanliness to the people to help the people know that they are ritually clean in the eyes of God.
- (5) Fifth, the priests are to help judge disputes. That responsibility is commanded in Deuteronomy 21:5.

So, here is that list again: fulfill the tabernacle service, teach the Scripture, serve as mediators, facilitate the purity code, and judge disputes. Because of the special responsibilities of the priests, mediating, teaching, judging, they are also held to a higher standard of behavior. That is in the second priesthood section in Leviticus towards the end. Chapters 21-22 begin this way “Speak to the priests, the sons of Aaron, and say to them...” And the commands that follow have to do with special requirements that go above and beyond the requirements expected of the normal Israelites, of everybody else. God has set Levi apart to represent him. And so, they are called to a high standard of ritual law. It is worth noting that these standards are almost all ritual standards, not moral standards. All Israelites are to pursue the highest of moral standards. God is not trying to establish a distinction between more moral priests and less moral laypeople or more spiritual priests and less spiritual laypeople.

And I should emphasize this point because it is an ongoing problem that persists through the time of Israel into the time of Christianity and in all forms of Christianity. Whether priest or missionary, pastor, monk, or nun, it is quite tempting to view professional Christians as somehow more moral or more spiritual. Like that is their job, to be better. There is a blessing that comes from having a vocation that allows for a focus on God’s word. I admit that. I love that I get to spend so much of my time in God’s Word or in vocation focusing on worship or prayer or evangelism. Jesus did expect people to show respect to his apostles when he sent them out. God expected his priests to be treated with respect in their role. Paul says that an elder who serves well deserves honor. But the roles and responsibilities are one thing, character, moral behavior, spiritual dependency on the Lord, those are something else, something available to and expected of all God’s people who seek after his heart.

In Exodus 19:6 God says that he has set apart the whole nation as a kingdom of priests, holy to him. The priests have a special responsibility to teach, but Deuteronomy 6 is also going to place that responsibility in the home. Moms and Dads are supposed to teach the stories, the doctrines, the behaviors to their children when they are sitting in their home or walking along the way. They don’t just leave it to the priest to teach. The priest has a special role as a mediator, but every Israelite serves as a mediator when he helps his brother or sister worship or when he shares the knowledge of God with someone who does not know God. So, the priests have a special role as mediator, but everybody mediates to some degree. Also, the priest has a special role as judge, but every Israelite can help resolve disputes with his neighbor, to seek to establish peace before you have to appeal to a more formal judge. The priests have a special role, but that role is not meant to take away personal responsibility for each person to serve God with their lives and to pursue spiritual relationship with God. They are not to be more moral or more spiritual. That is not the point of the priesthood.

The Background of the Golden Calf

Having said that, there is the special role for the Levites to play, a very special role of leadership. Nadab and Abihu have just been appointed as mediators, teachers, and judges of Israel. During their consecration ceremony, in Leviticus 8:35, Moses tells them, “You shall remain day and night for seven days and keep the charge of the LORD, so that you will not die, for so I have been commanded.” God’s words are meant to impress on Aaron and his sons the seriousness of their role. Do what you have been commanded, so that you will not die!

The text leading up to the punishment of Nadab and Abihu connects us back to the golden calf incident. They were present during the worship of the golden calf. Less than a year has passed, maybe 9 months. Their father Aaron had directly participated in reformulating the worship of Yahweh pressured by the people. In so doing, he had rejected the doctrine just delivered on Mount Sinai, breaking the covenants in making a god that would fit the sensibilities and desires of the Israelite people. God’s anger burned like a consuming fire at that remolding of the truth which he had delivered from the mountain top. After Moses came down, there was a fight in the camp and many died. And after that fight, God relented and withheld his anger from Aaron and Aaron’s sons and all the people. And then God, declares his name, “gracious and compassionate, slow to anger,

full of lovingkindness and truth.” Moses goes back up on the mountain to renew covenant. And when he comes down again, we had that long repeat of the tabernacle details as the tabernacle was being constructed. And the repetition created anticipation, moving slowly towards the event of God’s presence coming to dwell in the tabernacle. In approaching that moment of indwelling, a refrain began to appear over and over in the text. Do you remember what it was? What did the text keep saying over and over? They completed the hem of the priest’s garment “just as the LORD had commanded Moses.” They fastened a cord for the priest’s turban “just as the LORD had commanded Moses,” with each detail, “just as the LORD had commanded Moses.” That was the refrain. Instead of creating the tabernacle out of their own minds and their own vision of what true worship should be, they build it “just as the LORD had commanded Moses.” That is what they learned from the golden calf. We don’t innovate this religion. This is God’s truth. That same refrain is picked up again in Leviticus 8-9 as the priests go through the ceremony of consecration. They performed the ceremony “just as the LORD commanded Moses.” Those words are repeated 6 times here. The text is very clear. This is not a time for improvisation, not after the golden calf, not after the LORD has said, “Do exactly as I tell you so that you do not die.” But in spite of that clear direction, Nadab and Abihu improvise. They take authority on themselves to change up the ceremony of worship from the very first moment after they had been appointed to the priesthood.

This is the text of punishment, 10:1-2,

¹ Now Nadab and Abihu, the sons of Aaron, took their respective firepans, and after putting fire in them, placed incense on it and offered strange fire before the LORD, **which He had not commanded them.** ² And fire came out from the presence of the LORD **and consumed them,** and they died before the LORD.

Contrary to the previous text in which they did “just as the LORD commanded Moses,” here the text says they did that, “which he had not commanded them.” And contrary to how God relented from his consuming anger after the golden calf incident, here the fire of God’s anger “consumes them.” The bush wasn’t consumed. Nadab and Abihu, they are consumed. Reading just this narrative, if we just look at this, we might feel like God’s wrath is fickle or rash. But when we put it into the larger context, we see that is not the case. God is slow to anger. He did not demand Aaron’s life or the life of the sons after the golden calf rebellion. After that great failure by Aaron and the people, God communicated quite clearly his expectations that all be done just as he commanded. God even warned them directly, precisely that death would come if they did not do as commanded. And even after all that, they took the liberty to change the incense and the ceremony.

As we consider this text, we also have to take into account that it is not just about Nadab and Abihu. They have just been given the priestly responsibilities of mediator, teacher, and judge. God has called Israel to be different, to be set apart, to establish their society on a true and good understanding of reality. God is showing them what is beautiful and true and good. The sons of Aaron are given a great responsibility and wonderful opportunity to help guide Israel in a vision that brings life. And yet, they chose death. And I do not mean they chose their death, though they did, I mean they chose the way of death. They chose, almost immediately, to turn away from the way that God had set out for them and instead choose to reformulate the worship of God according to their own minds, their own thinking.

The Heart Attitude of Nadab and Abihu

A principle of biblical narrative that we have already looked at in this series is that God sees into the hearts of men, and he acts on that knowledge even when that state of heart is not communicated to us who are reading the text. We do not always hear, we do not always get all the information that God uses in order to act. We have to infer it based on how God does act. Why did God respond so graciously to Abraham’s questioning of the covenant? Well, because God saw a struggling heart of true faith, not a hardened heart of resistance. Why does God strike down Nadab and Abihu? I assume that God saw something in their hearts he did not like. They did not just make an honest mistake. This is not like an altar boy lighting a candle at the wrong time in the service and then

getting struck dead. They made a choice to come up with their own version of the service, after being given all these warnings, and in heart they were doing exactly the same thing that the Israelites had done in molding of the golden calf.

The narrative quickly brings up another example of this principle of God judging according to the heart. So Aaron and his other two sons must continue with the atonement ceremony for the people and in doing that the surviving sons allow the portion of the purification goat, which they were supposed to eat, to be burned up on the altar. Moses looks for the portion of the sacrificed goat, because he knows they are supposed to eat it. And he is not happy at all when he discovered what happened. That they let it be burned up. And Moses says this to Eleazar and Ithamar in Leviticus 10:17-18,

¹⁷ “Why did you not eat the sin offering at the holy place? For it is most holy, and He gave it to you to bear away the guilt of the congregation, to make atonement for them before the LORD.

¹⁸ Behold, since its blood had not been brought inside, into the sanctuary, you should certainly have eaten it in the sanctuary, **just as I commanded.**”

Notice here Moses uses that phrase again, “just as I commanded.” They were supposed to do this. These two sons did not follow the ceremony requirements exactly the way they had been instructed to do. And Aaron responds back to Moses in verses 19-20,

¹⁹ But Aaron spoke to Moses, “Behold, this very day they presented their sin offering and their burnt offering before the LORD. When things like these happened to me, if I had eaten a sin offering today, would it have been good in the sight of the LORD?” ²⁰ When Moses heard *that*, it seemed good in his sight.

So, we do not get all the detail of what Aaron is saying. We need to read it in context. He is basically saying, “How could they be expected to eat their part of the offering on the same day that their brothers were consumed by the fire of the LORD?” It is a change in the ceremony. But it is a change that does not go against the intent of the ceremony or against the heart of the Lord. It is not intended as an improvisation of the ceremony. It is not like they want to do this again. Their brothers had just died. And Eleazar and Ithamar had not stopped to grieve. They kept going with the ceremony, the atonement for the people. They accepted the Lord’s just judgment, and they continued. But they were grieving. And in their grief, they could not bring themselves to eat the portion of the sacrifice set apart for them. And just as God saw the rebellious intent of Nadab and Abihu, and he responded severely, he also saw the grieving hearts of Eleazar and Ithamar, and he does not respond with punishment.

A disrespect for God’s authority was present in the heart of the first two brothers. The punishment executed on them was not just about them as individuals. It was also about protecting the people of God from the perversion of truth by the priests of God. The Lord knows that Israel will suffer plenty from evil priests. It is a reason for the rise of the prophets later in Israel to challenge the false teaching and practices of kings and priests who go astray. But here at the start of it all, we are in an especially tenuous time. We need the Word of God to be completed by Moses. He has got to finish writing in down, and he has got to put it into the hands of priests who will keep it safe and copy it and teach it and make sure it is passed on. Treason is always taken seriously. Treason during a time of war is taken deadly serious. This transition from Egypt to Canaan, from slave people to nation, is like a time of war. Israel will be under attack from without on its way to Canaan, and when it gets to Canaan. And it is under threat from within. We saw that with the golden calf. The strange fire offered by the two brothers is a form of treason. It is rebellion against the clear commands of God by two men who were supposed to teach the Word of God to other people. But how can they teach it when they are reformulating it themselves. They are making it up as they go.

The strange fire offered by the two brothers reminds me of the protestant seminary president, I referred to in the last lesson. She is that Christian leader who told the New York Times columnist that it does not matter whether Jesus lived or died or was ever raised from the dead. Doesn’t matter. The point of the story of Jesus is that love never dies. She went on to claim that the virgin birth is

oppressive toward women and that we have no idea whether there is an afterlife or not. And you are weak in faith if that is important to you. And I am left wondering how many people are being led away from salvation, from new birth in Christ, from eternal life with God because of the leadership of this woman? She has taken the job of training men and women to go out into Christian ministry with this newly molded version of Christianity that reworks the biblical text into an unrecognizable form? So, not only is she participating in the corruption or leading astray of the people who come to be trained in her school. But people are going to attend churches and hear a false message that keeps people bound to the way of eternal death, because this woman feels free to remold Scripture into a form pleasing to her and to her society. What should God's response be to such a person who takes on herself the authority to reformulate the gospel of Jesus Christ and then teach it to others who are going to go out and teach it to others. What should God do to someone like that? She may not be struck down in this life by fire. God is slow in his anger. He is patient. But she should take heart to the words of John in the last paragraph of the Bible.

¹⁸ I testify to everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: if anyone adds to them, God will add to him the plagues which are written in this book; ¹⁹ and if anyone takes away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God will take away his part from the tree of life and from the holy city, which are written in this book.

We do not mold the truth into our own image. We receive the truth from God. God's removal of Nadab and Abihu from the priestly leadership of Israel was not just about Nadab and Abihu. It was a mercy to Israel to remove them from a place of teaching.

Two Other Examples of Severe Punishment

The other two examples of God's severity that I mentioned involve the stoning of two average Israelites. They are not priests. They are just normal people. The man in Leviticus 24:10-23 is stoned for blaspheming the name of God. The man in Numbers 15:32-36 is stoned for gathering wood on the Sabbath. These examples also stand as shocking for the severity of God in the punishment. But I would suggest that one reason they stand out as shocking is that, in fact, they are rather rare and isolated judgments in the record of Scripture. There will be quite a bit of punishment in the book of Numbers against this first generation that comes out of Egypt that continues to grumble against God. So, there will be punishment on the people as a whole. But as we move through the rest of the Old Testament, we encounter regular and consistent failure by God's people to resist temptations to idolatry and immorality. But if the sentence of death was literally carried out every time an adult son cursed his parents or a woman cursed God or an Israelite broke the Sabbath, then we should see the death penalty enforced all the time. And we do not see that. It could be that it is just not recorded. But even when we do have a record of Israelites breaking the law, the death penalty is rarely the enacted as the punishment in the text of Scripture. Quite possibly, the death penalty was considered the maximum punishment, a just punishment for the crimes it is connect to, but judges had the right to determine whether or not to give the maximum sentence. That is how it actually plays out in Israel, the records we have of judgments. We could argue whether that was God's intention or not. Maybe God intended that they give the maximum penalty every time. But it does not appear to be that way. Whatever the reason, the Old Testament record just simply does not show regular enforcement of the death penalty for blasphemy or for Sabbath breaking, for laws like that. So, I can only give you these two examples that really stand out as shocking. But part of the reasons they are shocking is that they stand out as unusual.

I believe the most important detail about our context here in the Pentateuch is that we are in a crucial, transitional time for Israel, what I just called a time of war. The first generation of adults out of Egypt is deeply influenced by Egyptian society, which primes them to connect with and accept much of Canaanite society when they get there. Their hearts are aligned with a way of death. God is reforming the culture to a way of life. The holy seriousness of God and the authority of Moses must be upheld in order to bring about reformation. The Word of God is being formulated. It is not yet

written down and accepted as authoritative. God requires the maximum penalty in these cases because of the tenuousness of this transitional time out of Egypt, moving into the promise land. That is my opinion.

I believe the situation is similar to the punishment of Ananias and Saphira. Here it is the birth of Israel, there it is the birth of the church. Here God is formulating the Torah through Moses, there God is formulating the New Testament through the apostles. Both of these are crucial times, the birth of the church, the birth of Israel. And God chose severe punishment to establish the authority of Moses and the authority of the apostles, the authority of his Word. We are not playing around here. This is truth. This is the way of life. If we go wrong on this, we are leading thousands to death. We cannot be priests who hold out life, if we reject the gospel of life. We need to clearly establish the Word of God during these times of transition, so that we can preach it during times of peace.

And I am not saying that God just chose these individuals to make a point. The punishment was announced ahead of time. And God saw what was going on in the hearts of these men who committed these transgressions. I believe God was righteous in his judgment, wise in his choice of punishment. But I am saying why he did not choose leniency or mercy in these cases. I am saying that it had very much to do with the time of crucial transition that the society is going through.

The Priest as Mediator

As a closing point, I want to turn back to the idea of the priesthood in the Mosaic Covenant to clarify something I said about the responsibilities of priests.

In the Old Covenant, God did intentionally establish an additional barrier between himself and the typical believer. The tabernacle contributed to this barrier, since only priests could enter. And the priesthood contributed to this barrier. The priests served as mediators. They received the sacrifice from the worshiper and then carried it for the worshiper to the altar. And in this, we need to remember that the tabernacle and the priests were both symbolic. The real tabernacle, the real mediator exist in the spiritual reality of God. The physical tabernacle, the physical priesthood are meant to be symbolic. We could say that the Mosaic rituals produce shadows of a spiritual reality. Something that is truly real.

The author of the letter to the Hebrews says this in 8:4-5,

⁴ Now if [Jesus] were on earth, He would not be a priest at all, since there are those who offer the gifts according to the Law; ⁵ who serve a copy and shadow of the heavenly things,

The ritual performed by the priest is symbolic. It is meant to point the Israelites to something else. God established the priesthood and the tabernacle as a barrier between himself and his people until that time when he would actually make the sacrifice of atonement that truly pays for sin. Until the real event happens on the cross, God maintains the symbolic barrier. This is Hebrews 9:8-10,

⁸ The Holy Spirit *is* signifying this, that the way into the holy place has not yet been disclosed while the outer tabernacle is still standing, ⁹ which *is* a symbol for the present time. Accordingly both gifts and sacrifices are offered which cannot make the worshiper perfect in conscience, ¹⁰ since they *relate* only to food and drink and various washings, regulations for the body imposed until a time of reformation.

So, when we talk about the mediator function of the priest, there is both a sense in which the priest does act as a mediator between God and man and a sense in which he cannot act as the true mediator between God and man. There is a sense in which a person can help mediate between another person and God. You can help a person experience the forgiveness of God. You can help a person by turning them to the truth of God. You can help a person express gratitude to God. And that function can be served by a priest, also it can be served by a regular person. But in the other sense of being mediator, in the sense of actually providing a way for a person to come to God, there is only one mediator who can do that, who can truly establish a way to God. Paul makes that point

clear in 1 Timothy 2:5 “For there is one God, *and* one mediator also between God and men, *the* man Christ Jesus.” And this is also the point of the writer of Hebrews in 7:26-28.

²⁶ For it was fitting for us to have such a high priest, holy, innocent, undefiled, separated from sinners and exalted above the heavens; ²⁷ who does not need daily, like those high priests, to offer up sacrifices, first for His own sins and then for the *sins* of the people, because this He did once for all when He offered up Himself. ²⁸ For the Law appoints men as high priests who are weak, but the word of the oath, which came after the Law, *appoints* a Son, made perfect forever.

Like the sinful and struggling line of David that never succeeds in producing a true and good and holy king, so also the line of Aaron never succeeds in producing a true and good and holy high priest. Human priests, year after year, must offer up sacrifice for their own sin, and only then can they offer up sacrifice for people, reminding us that the priests are only symbolic mediators. They are sinful men unable to provide for their own way to God, much less provide a way for other people. There are no saints, no priests, no humans who can help you gain access to the Holy of Holies. The priesthood and tabernacle created a barrier between God and man to remind us that something real must take place if we are to have true relationship with God and walk in his life. The real has happened. Jesus Christ is the high priest who does not have to offer sacrifice for his own sin because he has none. He is the one who has made a way by offering up the perfect sacrifice, himself. He is the good and holy, infinite man who laid down his life for all people. And like God took each Levite as a symbolic payment to redeem the life of each first-born Israelite son spared in Egypt, so, Jesus is the real payment to redeem the life of every human child, man or woman who places their faith in him. We do not stand outside at the entrance to the courtyard anymore. We are welcomed all the way in to the presence of God. The barrier has been torn because the real has come and has given his life as payment for sin. There is no more need for symbolic sacrifice when the true sacrifice has been made.

Reflection Questions

1. What stands out to you as you read Leviticus 8-10? What do you notice as interesting or important or strange or confusing? What questions come to mind?
2. What language stands out in this narrative about Nadab and Abihu that connects back to the burning bush, the golden calf, and the tabernacle construction in Exodus?
3. How does that language help frame the seriousness of what Nadab and Abihu have done?
4. What two or three truths help you to understand God’s severe punishment of Nadab and Abihu?
5. Chapters 21-22 describe higher standards for the Levitical priests. How does this apply to full-time Christian workers today, to ministers and to missionaries, or to laypeople holding positions in church, such as elder or deacon or Sunday school leader or youth worker? Do you believe that those entrusted with special roles should be held to higher accountability? Why or why not?

Lesson 16: Leviticus 11-15 Ceremonial Purity

Introduction

| Leviticus: Kingdom Requirements | | | | | | |
|---------------------------------|--------------|---------------------------|--------------|----------------------|------------|----------------------|
| Key Passage: 19:2 | | | | | | |
| 1-7 | 8-10 | 11-15 | 16-17 | 18-20 | 21-22 | 23-27 |
| Ritual | Priesthood | Purity | Atonement | Purity | Priesthood | Ritual |
| Sacrifices | Consecration | Ceremonial
cleanliness | Substitution | Moral
cleanliness | Standards | Festivals,
etc... |

We are in the third frame of our chiastic structure of Leviticus. The first outer frame at the beginning and end of the book addresses worship rituals. The second frame on either end of the book addresses the priesthood and the third frame addresses purity laws. Instead of looking at both purity sections together, we are going to take them one at a time, so we will consider chapters 11-15 in this lesson and then chapters 18-20 in the next lesson.

Chapters 11-15 gives us laws of ceremonial purity or ceremonial cleanliness. These laws are symbolic. I will start by grouping the different laws into categories. Then we will consider the meaning and function of these laws. And then we will consider the question, “What here applies to us as New Covenant believers?”

How do we organize the ceremonial purity laws in Leviticus 11-15?

The text separates into four categories: cleanliness and animals in chapter 11, cleanliness and birth in chapter 12, cleanliness and leprosy in chapters 13-14, and cleanliness and bodily fluids in chapter 15.

1. Cleanliness and animals. (11)

We start with the most well-known cleanliness laws about which animals may or may not be eaten. Jews today call these kosher laws. Kosher comes from a Hebrew word meaning suitable or pure.

The text starts with a formula in 11:1-2 that we are going to see repeat, “The LORD spoke again to Moses and to Aaron, saying to them, ‘Speak to the sons of Israel, saying, ‘These are the creatures which you may eat from all the animals that are on the earth.’” This section is then wrapped up at the end of the chapter with a summary this way, this is verses 46-47,

⁴⁶This is the law regarding the animal and the bird, and every living thing that moves in the waters and everything that swarms on the earth, ⁴⁷ to make a distinction between the unclean and the clean, and between the edible creature and the creature which is not to be eaten.

So, we have animal, bird, everything that moves in the waters, and then everything that swarms on the earth and that includes rodents, reptiles, bugs, so the list here is fairly comprehensive, but once again, what seems like a lot of detail to us when we get into it and start reading through it, is not that much detail if you are actually trying to put it into practice. We have another 20 verses in Deuteronomy 14 about clean and unclean animals, but that code is mostly restating this code, so adds very little additional information. We pretty much just have these two similar chapters in all the Torah on the food laws.

Jewish Kosher laws have expanded a great deal on these. For example, orthodox Jews will not put meat and dairy on the table at the same time. Meat must be separated from dairy. No cheeseburgers. And we have to ask, where does that come from? I don’t remember any comments about dairy in any of the verses. The Jewish argument quotes Deuteronomy 14:12, “You shall not boil a kid in its mother’s milk.” But there is a really big leap from not boiling a lamb in its mother’s milk to not eating cheese on a hamburger. Are we really supposed to take this one odd, half of a verse as creating this whole category of no meat, no dairy on the table at the same time? I do not think that was the intention of Moses at all. I would argue that Jewish kosher laws go way beyond Moses.

So, these things are clear from Moses, no pork, no shrimp, no vultures, no rats, no spiders. But lamb, trout, chicken, locust that's all good. Also, cookware that touches the unclean must be washed or thrown out. And animals found dead are all unclean, so, no roadkill allowed.

2. Cleanliness and birth. (12)

We get the introductory formula again in Chapter 12:1, "Then the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, 'Speak to the sons of Israel, saying, ...'" and that introduces the second set of cleanliness requirements concerning birth. After birth the mother is considered unclean. We have to ask, "What's up with that?" The text goes on to say that her period of uncleanness is longer if she gives birth to a girl than if she gives birth to a boy. So, how do we read that? That does not sound right.

I do not think this text was meant to demean or devalue motherhood or baby girls. I believe that is the wrong way to read the requirements. Though it is certainly one of those texts that unsettles us. I am going to address the uncleanness of birth when I talk about the meaning of these laws. I do not want to give an easy or pat answer to the difference in the text between birth to a boy and birth to a girl. So, please forgive me, but I am going to reserve that question for when we get to the book of Numbers. I'll take the opportunity then to look at several passages from different books in the Pentateuch that might be taken to devalue women and then I will suggest a different perspective that I believe fits better with the text, the cultural situation, and the biblical principle of equal worth for men and women. It will be more beneficial to wait and address several of these difficult passages together at the same time.

3. Cleanliness and leprosy. (13-14)

Chapters 13-14 cover cleanliness and leprosy. The introductory formula "Then the LORD spoke to Moses and to Aaron, saying..." occurs three times in these two chapters at the beginning in 13:1, but then also in 14:1, and 14:33. So, we could subdivide the requirements into leprosy of the skin, mildew in leather, and mildew in the walls of buildings. The Hebrews used the term leprosy to group all these all together. That's what we see in the summary at the end of the section in 14:54-57,

⁵⁴ This is the law for any mark of leprosy—even for a scale, ⁵⁵ and for the leprous garment or house, ⁵⁶ and for a swelling, and for a scab, and for a bright spot— ⁵⁷ to teach when they are unclean and when they are clean. This is the law of leprosy.

The law of leprosy, then, is a broad category of any kind of infection or growth, whether in people, in leather or cloth, or in buildings. Most of the text does give attention to identifying infectious disease in people and to providing rules for purification if and when the infection passes. Considering skin disease, the term leprosy here is a broad class of skin problems, not to be specifically associated with the disease we think of when we hear the term leprosy. That would be the worse case scenario that is mentioned here.

5. Cleanliness and bodily fluids. (15)

The final category, cleanliness of bodily fluids, also begins with the introductory formula in 15:1-2, "The LORD also spoke to Moses and to Aaron, saying, 'Speak to the sons of Israel, and say to them, ...'" The section is summed up in this way at the end in 15:32-33,

³² This is the law for the one with a discharge, and for the man who has a seminal emission so that he is unclean by it, ³³ and for the woman who is ill because of menstrual impurity, and for the one who has a discharge, whether a male or a female, or a man who lies with an unclean woman.

These laws are evenly distributed between men and women. That last phrase, "a man who lies with an unclean woman" does not refer to a bad woman but refers to a man sleeping with a woman during her menstrual cycle. The woman is not morally or spiritually unclean. She is ceremonial unclean during her period.

What is the function and meaning of the ceremonial purity laws in Leviticus 11-15?

The Meaning

The primary meaning of the cleanliness laws is symbolic holiness of the Israelites as a recognition of the real holiness of God. In the chapter on animals, 11:44-45 states, “I am the LORD your God. Consecrate yourselves therefore, and be holy, for I am holy. And you shall not make yourselves unclean with any of the swarming things that swarm on the earth.”⁴⁵ For I am the LORD who brought you up from the land of Egypt to be your God; thus you shall be holy, for I am holy.” That is the main idea. The main idea is that the Israelites would see themselves as set apart and holy because God truly is holy.

Uncleanliness will also be connected to the sins of idolatry and immorality in the next, parallel section, and throughout the Old Testament. But the behaviors or conditions in this chapter are not sin or states of sin. Here we are concerned with ceremonial uncleanliness. Just thinking about the animals, are the animals sinful or somehow evil that are declared unclean. Well, no. God declared all animals good in Genesis 1 at the completion of creation. Jesus said this regarding food in Matthew 15:11 and 17-19.

¹¹ “It is not what enters into the mouth *that* defiles the man, but what proceeds out of the mouth, this defiles the man... ¹⁷ Do you not understand that everything that goes into the mouth passes into the stomach, and is eliminated? ¹⁸ But the things that proceed out of the mouth come from the heart, and those defile the man. ¹⁹ For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, slanders.”

Peter was instructed to eat freely of any animal and to enter into a Gentile home where non-kosher food would be served. This is the word he received in Acts 10:15, “What God has cleansed no longer consider unholy.” Paul reaffirms this statement, declaring in Romans 14:14, “I know and am convinced in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself...” The language of holy, clean, and unclean used here in Acts and Romans points us right back to this code we are looking at in Leviticus. And so, we take away this principle: if the food laws can be lifted in the New Covenant, then the eating of unclean animals was never a sin in and of itself in the first place. Eating unclean animals was only sinful during the time when God commanded that those animals not be eaten. So, if I told my little girl not to eat any jelly beans, that would not mean that jelly beans were necessarily evil. It is not a sin to eat a jelly bean. But it would be a sin for her to disobey her father and eat the jelly bean. So, at any point, I could lift the ban on jelly beans. Eating unclean meat was sinful because God commanded not to do it, not because of the inherent sinfulness of particular animals.

So, the idea of being unclean here is ceremonial. That is true of pork, it is true of a man with an infectious skin disease, it is true of a woman who has just given birth or the woman who is in her menstrual period. None of that is sinful in and of itself. It is symbolically unclean. And cleansing comes simply through washing, waiting an appropriate amount of time, and perhaps through sacrifice.

The foundational meaning of the cleanliness laws is a symbolic acknowledgement of the holiness of God. Let's consider now the function of these laws. Some of them seem to have different intents. What possible effects were intended?

The Function

1. The first function of the ceremonial purity code is to employ fundamental areas of life to provide regular reminders to the Israelites that God is holy and that human life is truly experienced by bringing daily behaviors in line with the truth of who God is. We order our behavior according to who our God is. Whether we are seeking moral purity or whether we are seeking ceremonial purity, the code reminds us that we align our life with God because God is holy.

2. So, first we have a focus on the holiness of God. But then also we have a reminder of our human sinfulness and frailty. Many of the unclean animals lived as carrions, feeding on dead flesh. There is an analogy there for sin. Leprosy proves an even better analogy, especially in its most extreme form. The leper loses sensation in the nervous system and becomes unaffected by cuts or burns or other wounds. In effect, he doesn't know how badly his actions are hurting him. He can't feel it. He can't sense that he is doing something damaging to himself. When we live separated off from the ways of God, our desires are twisted, and sometimes that works out okay because our desires are in line with what is good, but often our desires are in line with what is harmful and what is destructive. Sin is a spiritual leprosy. We do not have a sense that our behaviors are damaging our hearts, our minds, and our relationships. And so, we continue to do things without a recognition of what we are doing. And those wounds increase, and they grow, and the infection spreads. So, the ceremonial code uses the symbolism of life and death to remind us of our sinfulness and of our dependence on God.

3. So, along with symbolically emphasizing the holiness of God and the uncleanness of our sin, the ceremonial purity code also created a barrier between the Israelites and other peoples. Considering the ritual of the tabernacle and the requirements of the priesthood, we saw already how God established a symbolic barrier inside of Israel between the average Israelite and the presence of God in the Holy of Holies. The food laws and other ceremonial practices create barriers with people outside of Israel. The Israelites are supposed to interact with non-Israelites. They cannot be a kingdom of priests if they do not interact with those who need to believe. But for foreigners to enter into full fellowship with the Israelites, they have to be willing to place themselves under the covenant law of God. The modern cultures of Egypt and Canaan would exert significant pressure of the Israelites to conform. The purity code established a barrier between Israelites and non-Israelites society to help the Israelites resist being affected by ungodly culture and conforming to the thoughts and behaviors of that culture.

There was a powerful practical benefit to these laws. For centuries, Jews maintained their cultural identity even living as exiles without a homeland of Israel, surrounded by other cultures in which they lived. Their laws forbade marriage with outsiders and limited the influence of outside culture in their communities. They could not fellowship easily with Gentiles or with non-Israelites. I do not think that Christians are called to separate off from surrounding culture. We are not given these cultural barriers. I do think that Christians often underestimate the power of culture to mold thought, values, behaviors, especially among our youth. Are we aware of how much we are being molded by the culture around us? And what are we doing? We do not have the law establishing barriers for us. What steps are we taking to resist being conformed and just kind of going with the flow of culture around us?

I would suggest these three functions are the primary functions of the ceremonial purity code, to highlight the holiness of God, to remind us of the corruption of sin, and to create a partial barrier between Israelites and non-Israelites. Here are two more functions, I see in the ceremonial code.

4. The ceremonial purity code forbade pagan ritualistic practices. This is an important function we tend to miss because the practices the codes forbid are not things we experience in our cultures, so we miss that that is what is going on here. Recognizing this function helps us to understand some of the more obscure or confusing laws that rise up. We read it, and we have no idea what it is about, but blood and bodily fluids, especially those relating to sexuality, were used in idolatrous and magical ceremonies, such as in fertility rites to move the gods to bless the crops or bless people with children. So, by declaring blood and bodily fluids unclean, God eliminates any such practices from his tabernacle. Menstrual blood, semen, birth tissue, any other kind of blood or fluid, which may have been used in pagan rites was automatically excluded. And it seems odd to us, but it was an important point to establish in the Ancient Near East.

That pagan rites are being forbidden becomes evident when Moses addresses clean and unclean animals in Deuteronomy 14. That section on food laws begins and ends with two very odd commands. It starts this way with 14:1-2,

¹ “You are the sons of the LORD your God; you shall not cut yourselves nor shave your forehead for the sake of the dead. ² “For you are a holy people to the LORD your God, and the LORD has chosen you to be a people for His own possession out of all the peoples who are on the face of the earth.

So, that is odd. And then it ends in verse 21 with the seemingly out of place command, “You shall not boil a kid in its mother’s milk.” And in between are all the laws about clean and unclean animals. The logical connection that tends to elude modern readers is that both verses, at the beginning about cutting and at the end about boiling milk have to do with pagan ritual. So, the cutting or shaving of the head in verse 1 was a pagan practice. Cutting was used by the prophets of Baal, for example. That is mentioned in the story about Elijah. They are symbolically re-enacting the death of Baal by cutting themselves in order to move him to act. And boiling a baby goat in its mother’s milk has nothing to do with meat and dairy and whether or not we can eat a cheeseburger. It is probably a fertility rite that was enacted. It is sort of magic or it is sort of to move the god to give you favor to help your crops grow or to help you have babies. So, the food laws in Deuteronomy are given in this context with a law at either end that rejects pagan worship rites practiced in the cultures around Israel.

So, making sure that the Israelites did not practice these pagan rituals was one of the functions of the ceremonial purity rites. Another example that targeted pagan ritual is the prohibition against tattoos in Leviticus 19:28, “You shall not make any cuts in your body for the dead nor make any tattoo marks on yourselves: I am the LORD.” So, the first command in that verse is definitely against a pagan spiritual practice of cutting the body for the sake of the dead. Presumably, that is also why tattoos are mentioned here. The prohibition is against tattoos in general for Israelites, but the idea behind that is not that themselves are bad. The idea behind that is that tattoos are used in these cultures to elicit the favor of the gods. It is a pagan rite. That is what is wrong with the tattoos. It is paganism or magic.

5. I want to mention one last function of the ceremonial purity code. I do not think the Bible directly affirms this, though it seems to me rather self-evident. A secondary function of the purity code seems to have been to promote the health of the Israelites, both in regards to nutrition and hygiene. This function is not agreed on by biblical scholars. Here is a quote from John Calvin opposing the idea. He says this,

Those who imagine that God here had regard to their health, as if discharging the office of a Physician, pervert by their vain speculation the whole force and utility of this law. I allow, indeed, that the meats which God permits to be eaten are wholesome, and best adapted for food; but, both from the preface,—in which God admonished them that holiness was to be cultivated by the people whom He had chosen,—as also from the (subsequent) abolition of this law, it is sufficiently plain that this distinction of meats was a part of that elementary instruction under which God kept His ancient people. “Let no man therefore judge you (says Paul) in meat or in drink, which are a shadow of things to come; but the body is of Christ”⁷

I think the resistance comes from scholars, like Calvin and later scholars, who see the purity laws as a means to uphold the holiness of God and the holiness of the Israelites and to create the separation with other peoples. And I agree with that. I think that is the primary function of the holiness laws. That is what we are taught by Scripture. So, I do not want to suggest that the whole purpose of the laws is health and nutrition. So, that’s what Calvin is saying, that if we suggest somehow that God is a physician then we are perverting by “vain speculation the whole force and utility of this law.” I think it is quite possible for the laws to have a secondary function. And I am quite ready to say that the

⁷ Rooker, M. F. (2000). *Leviticus* (Vol. 3A, p. 172). Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers.

nutrition and hygiene were benefits of the ceremonial law. And I assume God intended those benefits as a way to provide for and protect the Israelites. The Bible does not say, “Do these things so that you will be healthy.” Still, it appears obvious to me that the code does commands healthy behaviors. And that God had that in mind.

Scavenging animals that eat trash and dead flesh are forbidden. Pigs were used to control trash in Philadelphia waste dumps into the late 1800s because pigs will eat anything. Shrimp are filters of the sea. Crabs eat up dead stuff in seconds, and vultures swoop down. Toxins build up in the flesh of carrion eaters like this, things that feed off the dead. And God’s protecting hand seems to be at play here in not allowing his people to eat these things, especially at a time when there is no refrigeration. It is probably good they were not eating pork. You would at least lower your bad cholesterol if you ate kosher.

For women going through menstruation or having recently experienced birth, we can imagine how uncomfortable that could have been in the Ancient Near East without any modern feminine hygiene products. The idea of being unclean during this time was symbolic. They were not really considered sinful or wicked for giving birth or having a period. That symbolic uncleanness then had the result of requiring them not to attend gatherings of the community for worship. They had enforced permission to skip worship gatherings just after giving birth and during their period. And I understand that not all woman would like that. But I bet some would appreciate it very much.

The laws regarding skin disease directly affect health. If the disease is a spreading disease, the law here requires that the sick person is quarantined. And if the skin disease achieves a certain level of seriousness, the person may have to live outside of the camp. And certainly, that is a hard reality. Yet, with the level of medical knowledge available, it was also a very wise requirement for the protection of the whole community. And the same idea seems to apply to mildew in clothing or in the homes. The health of the family and the community was in question, and these ceremonial purity laws provided a protection to prevent the spread of contamination.

So, the ceremonial purity laws promote a cleanliness and a healthiness in life and also in religious ceremony that was unparalleled in the Ancient Near East.

What Mosaic laws apply to us as New Covenant believers?

We have described the purity laws and considered the meaning and function of those laws. Now here is a very real question we need to ask ourselves as New Covenant believers. Do any of the commands in Leviticus apply to us at all? I assume you are not trying to keep these laws, that you do not sacrifice in your church and that you do not keep the Jewish festivals, that you eat pork and shrimp, that you do not connect bodily fluids with staying away from church, that you do not check with your pastor about mildew in your home. We simply do not think about ever applying any of these commands even though they are clear commands of God.

Some of us pretend to keep the Sabbath but not really. The Sabbath is Saturday, so if you are keeping it on Sunday you are automatically not keeping the Levitical code. And we probably don’t even know what the real biblical rules are for what it means to keep the Sabbath. We know that we ought not go to our job, but probably a lot of the work we would do on the Sabbath would fall under the category of work in the Bible. If you eat a nice meal as a family, someone’s doing the work to prepare it. So, even if we claim to keep Sabbath, we are really not trying to keep it according to the Levitical code.

But the question of what might apply is going to get even harder in our next lesson when we move from the ceremonial purity laws, which we really do not feel like we need to apply anyway, to the moral purity laws in 18-20. These we are ready to ignore, but those chapters are going to address idolatry, sexuality, homosexuality, loving your neighbor, other laws that we feel like we ought to observe. It gets even harder when we add in the 10 Commandments. Do these laws apply to us? And if we say, “Yes” to those laws, to the moral laws, but “No” to the food laws, what is our justification? Are we just picking and choosing the ones that we want to do, what is right to us? That is the attack

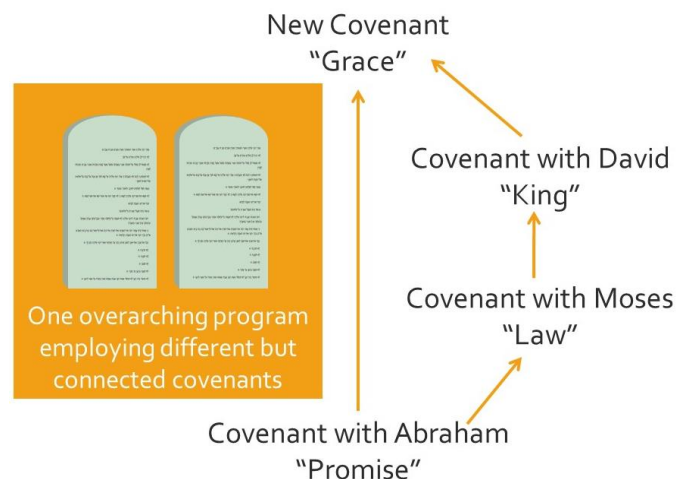
you will get from the sceptic, that “You all are just picking and choosing.” “Yeah, you say that homosexuality is wrong but then you do not obey the majority of these laws that are in Leviticus. So, which is it? You are just doing what you want.”

And that might be true. Maybe we do not really know. But that does not have to be the case. We can know whether or not the laws apply to us who live under the New Covenant. The answer to this question comes from our understanding of covenant in the Bible.

My Old Testament professor Jeffrey Niehaus taught a way of understanding the relationship of biblical covenant that I find very helpful. I believe it is an accurate biblical perspective. I introduced his line of thinking back in Genesis when I taught that there are six covenant mediator prophets in Scripture. Six prophets who brought new covenant or mediated new covenant. And I got this from lectures under Dr. Niehaus, but the material is also available in his book *Biblical Theology, Volume 1, The Common Grace Covenants*.⁸

The first two covenants in Scripture were made with all of humankind, being mediated first through Adam and then through Noah. Niehaus calls these the covenants of creation and re-creation. They are common grace covenants, meaning that they are covenants for all people. And these covenants still stand. All people are under the authority of the great king whether they submit to that authority or not. God is not God of the Jews only nor of Christians only. Yahweh is Lord of lords and King of kings, God of all peoples.

In addition to these common grace covenants, God’s plan of salvation for all humankind involved entering into special grace covenant with specific groups of people. And there are four special grace covenants in Scripture with four covenant mediators, Abraham, Moses, David, and Jesus. And to borrow language from Paul in Romans, we can also call these covenants the covenant of promise, the covenant of law, the covenant of kingship, and the covenant of grace.



Niehaus describes God’s plan of salvation as “one overarching program employing different but connected covenants.” So, then it is up to us as we study Scripture to try to understand, what are the connections between the covenants? Where is there continuity and where is there discontinuity. The covenant with Abraham is the foundational promise upon which is built the covenant with Moses and the covenant with David. The New Covenant also stands on the foundation of the promise to Abraham and is the fulfillment of the Mosaic and Davidic covenants. I have a nice chart for that in the notes, if you want to go to observetheword.com and check that out.

Here are two key ideas regarding covenant. First, covenant is a formal agreement between God and a particular people. That is what covenant is, an agreement with God and a people. Second, the stipulations of the covenant apply to those for whom the covenant applies. The people of the covenant are supposed to live under the stipulations. The covenant with David, for example, only applies to the sons of David, that his line would rule forever. You are not of the line of David. It is not your covenant. You might benefit from that covenant, but the covenant itself does not apply to you. It is not with you.

I have also found it helpful to add to Dr. Niehaus’ presentation of covenant the recognition that every covenant with God elicits two basic questions. The first question we must ask regarding

⁸ Jeffrey J. Niehaus. *Biblical Theology, Volume 1, The Common Grace Covenants*. (Wooster, Ohio: Weaver Book Company, 2014) 34.

covenant with God is this, “What makes me, a sinful man, acceptable to be in covenant relationship with holy God?” And for biblical covenants, the answer to this first question is always 100% grace received by faith. That’s what makes you acceptable. Whether you are talking about the Abrahamic Covenant or the Mosaic Covenant or the New Covenant it is by grace through faith. Even the Davidic Covenant, that was not earned by David or his line, that was given by grace, and they accepted it. We saw this with Abraham. What was Abraham doing when God walked through the sacrificed pieces of the covenant oath in Genesis 15? Abraham was as passive as a person can be without being dead. There was not active righteousness required on Abraham’s part, he was in a deep sleep. And Genesis 15:6 had already declared him righteous by faith. God stepped in and took the covenant oath himself. It makes no sense, according to the rules of covenant, but he did it. He effectively said, “If you break covenant with me, I will die.” It is by grace through faith. And we see the same symbolism in the Mosaic covenant with the Passover Lamb. God’s people are saved from wrath by the blood of the Lamb. They are made acceptable by grace through faith. And we are going to see that again in Leviticus, and again in Numbers, and again in Deuteronomy.

Right now, in Leviticus our main concern is not the first question of covenant but the second question of covenant, which is this, “Having entered into relationship with God by grace through faith, how ought I now live?” Establishing expectations between the great King and his people is a major point of covenant. That is what covenant is all about. That is what the stipulations are all about, to tell us what is expected, how to live. God has redeemed Israel. Now he is communicating to them how he expects them to live. When a good Jew, living any time after Moses and before Jesus, asked the second question of covenant, “How ought I live?” The answer was, “Live according to the covenant stipulations given in the Torah. That is your covenant. Those are your commands.”

Okay, so with that understanding of covenant in place, we come back to the question we have as Christians, “What authority does the Mosaic covenant have over me?” To answer that, I say, “None, none.” I do not obey any of the Torah stipulations out of commitment to the Mosaic covenant because I am not under the Mosaic covenant. That was their covenant. That is not our covenant. I am not bound by any of that out of covenant obligation. When I ask the second question of covenant, “Now that I am in relationship with God by grace through faith, how then ought I live?”, the answer for me is, “live according the stipulations of the New Covenant. Live according to the sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5-8, according to the application section of Romans chapters 12-15, according to the second half of Ephesians, which teaches us who to walk worthy of the gospel, chapters 4-6.” There is plenty of law in the New Covenant of grace when we define law as the commands or stipulations, the dos and don’ts of covenant. You are to obey the expectations of the covenant that you are under. And you are under the New Covenant if you have placed your faith in Christ.

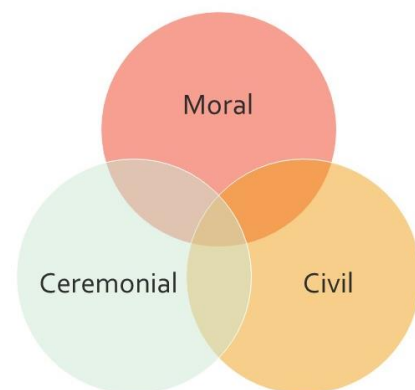
Our New Covenant does still exist in relationship to the Old Covenant. We still have to talk about what is that relationship. There is a sense of continuity. The Old is fulfilled in the New. The Old is also the historical prologue of the New Covenant. And the historical prologue of covenant helps to define the history of relationship between the great King, between God and between his vassal people. So, we as New Covenant believers, if we want to understand our relationship with God, it starts all the way back with creation in Genesis 1. That all still applies to us as truth. All the history, the doctrine, the wisdom still stands as true and as useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness (2 Timothy 3:16). But the stipulations of the Mosaic Covenant are not our stipulations.

And we are usually ready to accept that when it comes to the laws about food or washing or sacrifice. But what about the 10 Commandments? What about laws against adultery, laws against theft and murder and the requirement to love God and neighbor. Don’t those laws still apply to us as New Covenant believers? I believe the answer is, “Yes.” If you noticed, I was careful to say I do not have a covenant obligation to the laws of Moses. But might there be a different kind of obligation? Some people would say that the only obligation that matters is the New Covenant. But then they would go on to say, “And all these moral requirements, everything about adultery and about loving your neighbor and about theft, that is all repeated in the New Covenant.” So, we do not need the Old

Covenant. We can just obey the New. And that is a pretty good answer. But I would say something a little bit different.

I believe that we are bound by covenant obligation and our obligation as Christians is to the New Covenant, not to the Old. But in addition to that I believe we are bound to the moral nature of God, which transcends all covenants. Some covenant laws are in the covenant because God has a plan for his people that requires certain behaviors. For example, eat no shrimp. If that is a stipulation of our covenant, we are obliged to keep it. But it is not a stipulation grounded in the moral nature of God. So, God is free to lift that requirement any time he sees fit to do so. But God would never lift the prohibition against adultery. Adultery goes against the moral nature of God. And God would never lift the prohibition against idolatry. It is never good to worship false gods. False worship goes against the moral nature of God. So, this is how I would say it. We do not obey these moral commands because we have obligation to obey them under Mosaic covenant. We obey these commands because we have obligation to live according to the holy and good nature of God. If he has revealed that nature in Mosaic covenant, then it transcends that covenant, and we are obliged to live according to that revelation.

I am going to talk more about how we distinguish between a law that comes out of the moral nature of God and a law that does not in our next lesson when we address the moral purity code in 18-20. For now, I will suggest a three-part distinction that is often applied to the Mosaic law that I think is very helpful. We can divide the law into these three broad categories: moral laws, ceremonial laws, and civil laws. The 10 Commandments are good examples of moral laws. Civil laws govern society, so laws about criminal punishments or about slavery or about the jubilee year or gleaning in a field, those are civil laws. And then the rituals, sacrifices, and priesthood requirements are all ceremonial laws. These categories are a bit abstract. They are not very precise, moral, ceremonial, and civil. If you really want to study Mosaic law you need some more specific legal terms. And again, next lesson I will give you some of those. But for our purpose as Christians trying to understand what does and does not apply to us, these broad abstract categories are actually quite helpful, moral, ceremonial, civil, give us a general way of thinking about the law.



Israel was a geo-political entity. Geo means a place. It had a geographic place, and it had a political reality, a leadership. It was a theocratic nation, so a nation under God. The ceremonial and civil requirements for the nation Israel do not line up with the new conception of the people of God that came under the New Covenant. We are not a geo-political entity. We are a spiritual community of people bound together by a shared faith in Jesus Christ. That is something radically different. It is a new wineskin. If we try to live according to the law of the old Mosaic Covenant, our wineskin is going to burst. It was not created for that. So, we are taught to let go of the ceremonial and civil code of the Old as not applying to the New Covenant body of believers. Those laws are either fulfilled in Christ or not applicable to God's purposes for the New Covenant community. At the same time, we recognize that some of the laws of Mosaic covenant exists as expressions of God's moral nature. And God's moral nature is the same yesterday and today and forever. It transcends covenant.

We then have the sometimes, difficult challenge of determining whether a command is moral, ceremonial, or civil. And I find it pretty helpful to think about these categories as a venn diagram with moral, ceremonial, and civil each being a circle, and they all overlap each other. And right in the center all three of them are overlapping. So, think of three overlapping circles. And then with each law that we consider, we to think is it clearly in one circle or not. Is it clearly moral, clearly civil, clearly ceremonial or could it overlap between two different categories or is it in the very middle where it is all three categories? For example, the gleaning law, the law to go over your field only once

at harvest and then let poor people come behind and collect what is left, that law seems to be a civil law. It is telling people how to harvest. But it is also a law of generosity. There is a moral principle there for caring for the poor in society. Even more than that, it is not just to care for the poor, it is to give the poor an opportunity to work, so that they can gather in for themselves what they will eat. So, there certainly seems to be a moral principle involved, but we would never argue that it is a priori sinful, it is automatically sinful for a farmer to go over his field twice. It is just sinful because God said, we are not going to do it that way. So, the law of gleaning seems to exist in an overlap between certainly civil and maybe a moral principle. How about the Sabbath? That's a tough one to place. It seems civil in creating a seven-day work week and requiring everybody, including animals and slaves to rest on the seventh day. But it is also ceremonial. It is regarded as a day of worship to God and a day to be in fellowship with others. But it is also in the 10 commandments. Is there a moral principle to rest? Depending on your conclusion to that, you might put the Sabbath at the intersection of all three circles.

So, this is the challenge of considering how Old Covenant laws apply. Some clearly do not. Some clearly do. And some are hard to figure out. Are there moral principles we should apply even if we do not apply the exact details of a specific law? If in doubt, I recommend taking your cue from the New Covenant. What is clearly required there? Because that is our covenant. If we want to show love to God by keeping his commandments, there is plenty to keep us occupied in the New Covenant. But we also believe in the whole of the Bible. And we want to know God's Word fully. So, we are going to focus on the New Covenant, but we are also going to learn as much as we can about the goodness and the beauty and the truth of God through his revealed Word in the Old and in the New.

Reflection Questions

1. When you look through the purity code in Leviticus 11-15, what are some things that stand out to you as particularly interesting?
2. Looking over the whole, do you see a connection with life and death in the various clean and unclean categories? Do you see any other general connections between the various laws?
3. In Leviticus 11:44, God tells the Israelites to consecrate themselves (presumably through keeping the cleanliness code) because he is their Lord, and he is holy. What are some behaviors that Christians might perform today, that are not strictly required by moral law, but could be practiced as a reminder that they belong to God and are set apart for relationship and service? What might we do in our homes or in our worship gatherings or through our day to honor God or to symbolically remind ourselves that are in special relationship with a holy God?
4. What do you think about the fourth function of the holiness code to forbid pagan religious practices occurring in surrounding cultures, like cutting the body, boiling a kid in its mother's milk, or tattooing your body? How does the recognition of this function help you understand some of these laws?
5. How would you answer the accusation, "You Christians just choose from the Old Covenant law what you want to keep and ignore what you do not like?"
6. How would you answer the question, "What in the Levitical Code are we obliged to obey as New Covenant believers?"

Lesson 17: Leviticus 18-20 Moral Purity

Introduction

| Leviticus: Kingdom Requirements | | | | | | |
|---------------------------------|--------------|---------------------------|--------------|----------------------|------------|----------------------|
| Key Passage: 19:2 | | | | | | |
| 1-7 | 8-10 | 11-15 | 16-17 | 18-20 | 21-22 | 23-27 |
| Ritual | Priesthood | Purity | Atonement | Purity | Priesthood | Ritual |
| Sacrifices | Consecration | Ceremonial
cleanliness | Substitution | Moral
cleanliness | Standards | Festivals,
etc... |

The book of Leviticus dedicates two major sections to purity laws. The first set of purity laws come in 11-15. These are symbolic or ceremonial laws designed primarily to highlight the holiness of God and help set the Israelites off from the peoples that surround them. The second section on purity laws in chapters 18-20 shifts from ceremonial purity laws, symbolic laws, to moral purity laws. The key verse in this section is Leviticus 19:2, "Speak to all the congregation of the sons of Israel and say to them, 'You shall be holy, for I the LORD your God am holy.'"

The holy character of God is both to set the standard and the motivation for the behavior of his people. How should we live? "Holy like our God." Why should we live this way? "Because we want to live in a way that reflects who God is and who we are as bearers of his image." Both the ceremonial purity laws and the moral purity laws are intended to create an awareness among the Israelites that they are a people set apart for holy service.

At the beginning of the sermon on the mount, Jesus described this reality of being set apart as being salt in society. That's a stronger metaphor than we tend to realize in our day. Salt was much more than just a flavoring. Driving down to Dubrovnik on the Croatia coast you pass what looks to be another large Croatian island. But then you see it is not a true island. It is connected to the mainland by a peninsula. And along that peninsula, you see a stone wall, five and a half kilometers long (that's about three and a half miles) cutting across the entire peninsula. You think, why is a wall here? The wall is there to protect ancient salt flats that produced 500 tons of salt annually for the Republic of Dubrovnik, bringing in an estimated 15,000 in gold coin. As late as the Civil War in the United States battles have regularly been fought through history over salt supply. Why? It is not just about the flavor. Salt is an essential nutrient for the body. But more importantly, salt preserves. Salt preserves food. Days before refrigeration salt is what kept things from rotting. In Jesus day, to say that you are the salt of the world is not simply to say you add flavor, hopefully that's true. It is to say that you preserve what is healthy, what is good, in society for the benefit of the whole.

Jesus added, "You are light." Salt preserves what is good and healthy. Light reveals. Your life is to be set apart so as to reveal the way of life to other people. Would you say that you have set apart yourself to be salt and light in your society?

Matthew 5 concludes with these words from Jesus, "Therefore you are to be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect." You can hear Leviticus 19:2 in that command. "Be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy." "Be perfect, as your heavenly father is perfect." If you think perfection is an awfully high standard, you are correct. It is. And Jesus means be perfect. That is no different than the command to be holy. True holiness requires perfection. We cannot and should not water down this command. It means be perfect. If we were to go back through the laws that Jesus has addressed here in Matthew 5, we would see that his standard does not just include action. Jesus requires perfection in our words, even more than that, he requires perfection in our thoughts. Jesus' standard of holiness is perfection. When he says, "Be salt and light, truly set apart," he means it.

How are we supposed to take that? What do we do with such an impossible standard? I think Jesus gave this command for two reasons. First, God's standard of holiness is perfection. If you do not

understand that, then you do not understand why you so desperately need the grace of God. One of the things Jesus is doing in this sermon is challenging the weak position of the religious person who would claim that he is acceptable based on his faith plus his moral behavior plus his religious ceremony. "It is in faith and what I do. That's what makes me acceptable to God." And Jesus is calling that out. He is calling out the most rigorous, law-abiding Jews in his society when he says in verse 20, "I say to you that unless your righteousness surpasses *that* of the scribes and Pharisees, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven." If we are going to answer the first question of covenant, "What makes me acceptable to be in relationship with God?" with some mixture of faith and good works, we need to understand what we are really claiming. The Pharisees knew the righteous would enter the kingdom of heaven. They debated about who truly attained to the necessary level of righteousness. Jesus is telling them here what that level of righteousness is that makes you acceptable – perfection in thought, in word, and in action.

But here then is the second purpose for declaring, "be perfect as your God as perfect." When despair drives us to mourn our own sinfulness, and moves us to truly seek after righteousness, when we realize there is no way into the kingdom by works of the law, then we can receive the gift of grace. God declares us perfect, acceptable, by the blood of Jesus. The first question of covenant is answered decisively, "You are made acceptable by grace alone." Now the call to perfection becomes a vision to strive towards, not a standard by which you attain your own worth. Perfection is the vision of the good and the beautiful and the true. If you think you need to attain perfection in order to receive love or to have value, then you are missing the good news of the gospel. When you let go of the requirement of perfection, you are able to pursue the vision of perfection. You are valued without perfection. You are safe. You are secure in Jesus. You are loved. You are being transformed. So now, as Paul says, "Press on to lay hold of that for which also you were laid hold of by Christ Jesus." Be righteous not because you have to attain a standard, that you can't attain but because you are called to be truly whole. You have been set apart to become who God created you to be, a man, a woman created in his holy image, noble and good and kind and loving and pure. Seek perfection, knowing that Jesus Christ has already declared you perfect and will complete his perfection of you in glory. In the grace of God, "Be perfect as I am perfect. Be holy as I am holy," is transformed from an impossible standard, to a vision we pursue, even though we know we will not attain it until God completes us in heaven. We are not surprised when we fail. We know we are not perfect. We know we are in process. We know we can't attain it here. The strength of grace enables us to confess our sin, get back up, and keep going in our walk with him, striving after his righteousness as the definition of true life. So, be perfect as the Lord your God is perfect.

Now I am ready to get back to Leviticus 18-20. Starting with Jesus Sermon on the Mount allows us to recognize that the Law of Moses functions on two different levels at the same time. The law of Moses is both a code to govern a civil society and a standard for moral behavior. And we need to keep these two functions in mind as we study mosaic law. Jesus calls us to the higher standard. We also need to consider law as a civil code. And that's a lower standard. These are our two big topics for this lesson. We will start with consideration of the law as a civil code for society. Then we will consider the law as a standard for moral behavior, with more of a focus on Leviticus 18-20.

Mosaic Law: a code to govern civil society

The function of Mosaic law as a legal code for a society stands out in the way the 10 Commandments are formulated. "Do not murder." "Do not commit adultery." When you think about it, those are very low bars for behavior. Do we really think God is happy with us if we make it all the way through the day without killing anybody or cheating on our wife? "Great job! You really wanted to kill that guy who jumped the line and got the last chocolate croissant. I am amazed at how you held back and let him live. You get a special, oh and no adultery, you get two stars today." Is that really such a high bar? Apply that same line of thought to Leviticus 18. Is this really the highest bar that God expects? "Great job! In the last year, you did not offer up any of your children for child sacrifice, you never had sex with an animal, and you did not commit incest of any kind. Way to be holy! Good job!"

Is this the standard God expects of believers? No. This is the law serving as a code for civil society. A low bar is set to promote just basic decent behavior and to minimize the effect of sin on society. The extreme behaviors of murder, of adultery, theft, of standing up and being false witness in a court of law, those are all enforceable, criminal behaviors. It is clear when people break these laws. They can get caught. And we can have witnesses. And this is on the outside of what's allowed in society. When people break these laws, they are punished for the good of the whole. We are going to require this of everybody. The principle that some laws are given to minimize the effect of sin comes out in Jesus' answer to the Pharisees about why the Mosaic Law provides for divorce. This is Matthew 19:3-8.

³ *Some Pharisees came to Jesus, testing Him and asking, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any reason at all?"* ⁴ And He answered and said, "Have you not read that He who created *them* from the beginning MADE THEM MALE AND FEMALE, ⁵ and said, 'FOR THIS REASON A MAN SHALL LEAVE HIS FATHER AND MOTHER AND BE JOINED TO HIS WIFE, AND THE TWO SHALL BECOME ONE FLESH'?" ⁶ So they are no longer two, but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let no man separate." ⁷ They said to Him, "Why then did Moses command to GIVE HER A CERTIFICATE OF DIVORCE AND SEND *her* AWAY?" ⁸ He said to them, "Because of your hardness of heart Moses permitted you to divorce your wives; but from the beginning it has not been this way.

That is a really interesting conversation. Jesus is saying that Moses was instructed by God to provide in the legal code a certificate of divorce, even though that is not God's will for marriage. There are times, then, when God gave laws to Israel, not intended to require the standard of his perfect will for human behavior. This is not how he wants believers to behave. He wants much more. But instead he gives a standard to hold a non-believing society in check, because of their hardness of heart, because they are going to do evil. So, one of the purposes of law is to minimize the effect of sin in society.

If we wanted to go on and study the whole law as a code for civil society, here are two further characteristics we would need to recognize.

First, we would need to become experts on all five of the books of Moses, not just Leviticus. A little bit of the Torah is poetry, under 5%. Almost 60% is narrative. The rest, about 37%, contains the stipulations of law. So, 37%, just over a third, of Torah is law, dos and don'ts. Where do you think you would find most of that law? If you say Leviticus, you are right for a big chunk of it. 38% of the law is found in Leviticus. But you find the rest interwoven with covenant narrative through the other books of Torah.

The least amount of command is given in the book of Genesis, less than one percent of the commands. And that makes sense. The commands of Genesis came in connection with older covenants. Adam was told not to eat from the one tree. Noah was told that murder was a capital offense. And Abraham was told to circumcise all males. We get a minimal report on the laws that came before Moses.

Torah is the law for Israel. So, that is the law we get specified, the law given after the people have become a nation and have been rescued from Egypt. That law comes almost equally in the next four books of Moses. So, as I have said, Leviticus provides the most. It is still less than 40%. We get about 20% of the law in Exodus, 20% in Numbers, and 20% in Deuteronomy. The amount contained in Numbers is probably the most surprising. It is, in fact, slightly higher than Exodus and Deuteronomy. But we tend to think of Numbers as primarily narrative, the Israelites wandering in the desert for 40 years. But this is a characteristic of Torah law. Torah law is given in the context of narrative and is spread through the books of Moses.

The second characteristic to recognize is that Torah law covers a variety of legal categories. The abstract categories of moral, civil, and ceremonial help us as Christians to think broadly about the Torah law, which meets our need to understand how these laws might apply to us who live under New Covenant. And we are primarily concerned with moral law. But if we want to dig in and try to appreciate how these mosaic laws provided order for Israel and how they mitigated the effects of

evil in society and how they worked in the Ancient Near East, then we have to get more academic and more pragmatic at the same time.

We would need to consider the law in these categories.

1. Criminal law: A crime is a law against the state. For Israel, as a theocracy, a crime is an offence against God. And criminal law describes such offences and includes required punishments.
2. Case law: Case law provides an example to serve as a principle. Case law was often used in regard to personal injury or property law. For example, if a man's ox gores and kills a human being, but that ox has never acted in such a way before, then the man is not liable of a crime. The ox must be killed, so as not to gore another person. If an ox has gored a man, and does so again, then the owner, who did not kill the ox the first time, is liable for the murder of the man gored. So, this is an example of case law. And it is not just about oxen. It applies to the case of an ox. But it gives a specific case which can be used by judges to also determine other similar cases.
3. Family law: Family law applies to marriage, divorce, children, certain aspects of slavery, inheritance laws, and redemption laws.
4. Cultic law: Cultic law is the term used for ceremonial laws, such as, sacrificial laws, calendar laws, and symbolic cleanliness laws.
5. Compassionate law: Compassionate law requires citizens to act in a way that takes into consideration the needs of the poor. These laws include the prompt payment of wages, the law allowing poor people to glean in a field, and not keeping a coat overnight as pledge. Some compassionate laws were applied to the care of animals.

So, to consider the law of Moses as a civil code, we have to consider how laws operated over a range of legal issues, and we have to consider the whole of Torah to make sure we do not miss any of the relevant material pertaining to a particular issue.

A study of Mosaic law as a civil code also requires investigation into the principles of law. So, not just the dos and don'ts, but the principles behind the dos and don'ts which were given by Moses. Let's consider just one principle of law, which is probably the most famous and also one of the most misunderstood. It is the eye for an eye principle, stated three times in the Torah, in Exodus, in Leviticus and in Deuteronomy (Exodus 21:23-25; Leviticus 24:17-20; Deuteronomy 19:21). This is from Exodus 21:23-25.

²³ But if there is *any further* injury, then you shall appoint *as a penalty* life for life, ²⁴ eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, ²⁵ burn for burn, wound for wound, bruise for bruise.

That's the principle. Now, we have to consider how the principle was to be worked out in Israel according to Torah law. Here is a specific law. What book do you think this comes from? Listen carefully.

If a free-born man strikes a free-born woman, and thereby causes her to miscarry her fetus, he will weigh and deliver 10 shekels of silver for her fetus. And if that woman should die, then they shall kill his daughter.

Do you know where that law is located? It is not in the Bible. It is from the Law of Hammurabi, a 19th century Babylonian law code. It is an example of how eye for an eye might be applied. Did you catch what was really wrong with it? So, if the man ends up killing the woman, then the man's own daughter is taken from him and killed, so not the man who did the killing but the daughter of the man. And that in a sense is an eye for an eye. He kills a woman, so his daughter is killed. We don't see that kind of application anywhere in the Bible. That's not there. To go along with eye for eye, the Torah also has this principle in Deuteronomy 24:16,

¹⁶ Fathers shall not be put to death for *their* sons, nor shall sons be put to death for *their* fathers; everyone shall be put to death for his own sin.

So, what does “eye for an eye” mean in the Torah? It is an interesting question. Are you familiar with any instance from Torah law or any instance from biblical narrative where a person injures a person’s eye and then has his own eye injured, or when a broken bone is legally recompensed with a broken bone or when a cut hand with the cutting of a hand? Just off the top of your head, can you think of any instance, anywhere in the Bible, where that is the application of the law? If you do ever come up with one, I am still looking. I would really like to know. So, please let me know.

The one case where the eye for eye principle is applied literally is murder. A life is required for a life. That case is clear. But for personal injury the idea of eye for eye seems to focus on a principle of justice not a literal wounding of the perpetrator. The principle of eye for an eye seems to be that the one who committed the injury must make a just and fair payment to the one injured. Consider what the Torah requires from a perpetrator of personal injury. This is from the personal injury section in Exodus 21. This is verses 18-19.

¹⁸ If men have a quarrel and one strikes the other with a stone or with *his* fist, and he does not die but remains in bed, ¹⁹ if he gets up and walks around outside on his staff, then he who struck him shall go unpunished; he shall only pay for his loss of time, and shall take care of him until he is completely healed.

So, what is the punishment required of the man who committed the injury? Is he repaid bruise for bruise or wound for wound in the literal sense of hurting him in the same way he hurt the victim? No, he is not. He is held accountable for the wounds of the victim. But he himself is not wounded. He is to pay for the victim’s loss of time and provide for his care until he is completely healed. There is no hitting or wounding or cutting of the perpetrator. No eye is removed. The penalty sounds like what the good Samaritan did when he stepped in and found the injured man on the side of the road. The good Samaritan did what the perpetrator of the crime should have done. He covered the cost of the man’s injury. The perpetrator would also have to pay for loss of salary. The eye for eye principle seems to be a principle requiring just recompense from the one who committed the act of violence.

This is the kind of careful study we need to engage to more deeply appreciate the law as a working code for a real society. When we understand the law at work, we can see principles that apply even to our own society.

The law functioned as more than a civil code. It is a civil code, but it is more than a civil code. The Mosaic law also provides a standard for moral behavior. God expected more out of his people than submission to the law. A person who is satisfied with not committing murder, adultery, or theft is not a person seeking after the heart of God. Those are minimal standards to minimize the effect of evil and to provide order. God calls us further up and further in to his heart. Let’s consider the moral call of the Mosaic law by taking a closer look at Leviticus 18-20.

Mosaic law: a standard for moral behavior

If you have a Bible with you, I recommend that you pause the audio and skim your eyes over Leviticus 19. What phrase do you see repeating? I will pause for a second. What phrase repeats through Leviticus 19? We see it first in verse 2 which has the longer phrase, “You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy.” Then the shorter phrase begins to repeat: verse 4, “I am the Lord your God,” verse 10, “I am the Lord your God,” verse 12, “I am the Lord,” verse 14, “I am the Lord,” verse 16, “I am the Lord,” verse 18, “I am the Lord,” verse 25, “I am the Lord,” verse 28, “I am the Lord your God,” verse 30, “I am the Lord,” verse 31, “I am the Lord your God,” verse 32, “I am the Lord,” verse 34, “I am the Lord.”

Why do we pursue a moral life? We could come up with a number of reasons. This is the most basic. We pursue moral holiness because God is holy. And because he is God. He is the lord. That’s the ground for our moral action. We owe him allegiance and that allegiance must be exercised in accordance with who he is, his character. And this is the basis of the statement I made in the previous lesson. Moral law flows out of the nature of God. That’s the answer to an old question,

which goes like this, “Is the moral law over God or is God over the moral law?” If God must act in a certain way, then it might be inferred there is a standard over God to which he is accountable. If that is not true then we might ask, is murder only immoral because God has said it is immoral. If God is over the moral law, can’t God change any law? God could call adultery good. With that line of thought God could call rape good, if he chose to do so. Some religions actually teach that. So, which one do we affirm? Is God over the moral law or is the moral law over God?

We affirm neither. There is no moral standard over God. And God cannot arbitrarily call good evil or evil good. God is the standard. God is true to his own nature. The definition for all goodness, all beauty, all truth is grounded in the nature of who God is. “I am the Lord.” He is the ground for moral truth, moral goodness. So, we say it this way, “The moral law is an expression of the nature of God and God will always be true to his own nature.”

For human beings, the ground for morality begins with the nature of God. And he has given us two first principles of moral law to help us understand his nature. This is how God wants us to act. All the moral law is summed up in this, “You shall love the Lord your God, with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might.” And then there is a second law that goes with that law. To love God is to love those God loves, so the second principle goes like this, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” And who gave us those two principles? Where does that come from in the Bible? We usually connect this with Jesus, right? He sums up the law with these two commands in Matthew 22:37 and 39. But these commands are not new with the New Covenant. Jesus is quoting. And he is quoting Moses. The command to, “Love the Lord your God” is Deuteronomy 6:5 and the command to “Love your neighbor” is right here in Leviticus 19:18. In fact, it is paired with “Love the foreigner among you.” “Love your neighbor.” “Love the foreigner.” “Love your God.”

God himself is the ground, the standard for all morality. And he has given us these two base principles. Love God. Love your neighbor. A problem for us in our fallen sinful state is that neither loving God nor loving our neighbor comes naturally. We do a terrible job at guessing the moral will of God. We get some things right. Some moral principles work with our nature in our culture. And we get those right. But we miss a lot of the details, a lot of what this would really look like. And that has to do with our fallen nature. Something has been twisted or corrupted in us, that makes it impossible for us on our own to figure out what is the moral will of God. So, for us to know the moral will of God, he has to reveal it to us. And he has done that in the Old Covenant and in the New Covenant. In the covenants we receive revelation regarding what it really looks like to live a life of love to God and love to neighbor. The ten commandments, for example, are the basic or general stipulations of the Old Covenant. And the first half of those focus on loving God and the second half focusing on loving our neighbor. And then the moral component of Torah law helps fill out for us in more specific detail what it looks like to love God and love neighbor.

The laws of Leviticus 18-20 are part of that moral law. It gives us more definition by giving us more specific stipulations on how to live a life of love. I am not going to take time in this lesson to go through the commands of Leviticus 18-20. My desire has been more for us to take the opportunity to understand better law in the mosaic code. I do want to point out a couple of principles that come from Leviticus 18-20, and I will mention two specific commands for the sake of helping us think about the whole.

Leviticus 18-20 is loosely chiasmic in organization. And when you see the structure, it brings about a couple of principles. Leviticus 18 starts and Leviticus 20 ends, this is our chiasm, with the phrase, “I am the Lord.” That is the first frame, starting with “I am the Lord,” ending with “I am the Lord.” Then moving in we have the command to separate out from other nations. Then moving in again we have laws regarding sexuality. Then towards the end of 18 and the beginning of 20 we have a command against child sacrifice to Molech. In the center, we have all of chapter 19, that is the center of the chiasm. So, 18 and 20 are pointing us towards 19. And along with this chiasmic structure over the whole there is some structuring within each chapter. For example, chapter 18 begins and ends with

the command to separate from the surrounding nations while chapter 20 repeats near the beginning and at the end the command against mediums and spiritists. The repetition in chapters 18 and 20 of the laws against incest and other forbidden sexual practices emphasizes how powerful the draw to copy sexual practices in pagan societies is going to be on the people of Israel and continues to be for believers today.

Both chapters include a short command against idolatry and spiritism in the context of forbidding sinful sexual practices. Paul makes the same connection between idolatry and perverted sexual practice in Romans 1:18-32. Here is a fundamental truth. Turning from worship of God as he truly is leads to a further corruption of our hearts and minds. When we give ourselves over to ungodly practices, we redefine who God is to justify our desired behavior. Immoral behavior corrupts our view of God. False worship corrupts our behavior. We cannot turn away from God without a moral effect. And we cannot pursue immorality without a theological effect. Our belief in God and our behavior go hand in hand. So, idolatry and perverted sexuality go hand in hand. When we turn away from the true vision of who God is, our minds and our hearts are darkened.

There are two commands in the sexual code that I want to address briefly. Leviticus 18:19 forbids having sex with a woman during her menstrual period. Almost all the laws in this section forbid behaviors that Jews and Christians have traditionally agreed are examples of sexual immorality. But is that really the case with this law? It does not seem clear to me. It seems to me to have more to do with the ceremonial sanctity of blood in the mosaic code. And I am not arguing here whether it is a good idea or a bad idea. I am bringing up the question of whether it is a moral issue versus a ceremonial issue.

My point is that even in this section of laws, which I am calling moral purity laws, we seem to have an example here of ceremonial purity. And that indicates some difficulty in separating out which laws in the mosaic code are moral, and which are ceremonial, and which are civil laws. We may have a good sense of which laws are morally, and which are ceremonial and which are civil, but sometimes there is overlap which is not clear. And, in the end, we who are New Covenant believers, take our marching orders from the New Covenant. The Levitical code may inform us morally, but if we are unsure, we go with our understanding of the New Covenant.

The second law I want to point out is the prohibition against homosexuality in 18:22, “You shall not lie with a male as one lies with a female; it is an abomination.” The perspective of much of western society regarding the morality of homosexuality makes this a useful prohibition to consider. The repeated commands about being set apart from the nations that occur at the beginning of chapter 18 and at the end of chapter 20 are critical to our consideration of moral law. Here is that beginning section in 18:1-5,

¹ Then the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, ² “Speak to the sons of Israel and say to them, ‘I am the LORD your God. ³ You shall not do what is done in the land of Egypt where you lived, nor are you to do what is done in the land of Canaan where I am bringing you; you shall not walk in their statutes. ⁴ You are to perform My judgments and keep My statutes, to live in accord with them; I am the LORD your God. ⁵ So you shall keep My statutes and My judgments, by which a man may live if he does them; I am the LORD.

We have these three moral principles here. First, you are to define your morality based on the character of God. “I am the Lord your God.” Second, you know the moral will of God by the revelation you have received. “So you shall keep my statutes and my judgments, by which a man may live if he does them.” Third, you do not define morality according to the reasoning of your society. “You shall not do what is done in the land of Egypt where you lived, nor are you to do what is done in the land of Canaan where I am bringing you; you shall not walk in their statutes.”

Modern western society is telling us that homosexuality is a good, acceptable moral choice. And a lot of Western Christians are accepting that moral vision. Western Christians who support homosexuality sometimes argue that the prohibition we see in the Bible is against promiscuous

homosexual behavior, not against monogamous, homosexual behavior. That may be an interesting point to check, but once we check it, we discover that the Bible is quite clear in its rejection of homosexual sex. "You shall not lie with a male as one lies with a female; it is an abomination." That is not about promiscuity.

Someone else might make the observation I just brought up concerning the prohibition against sex during a woman's period. If that is a ceremonial prohibition, could homosexuality also be a ceremonial prohibition? That's a decent observation. The answer is, "No." The case of a woman in her period was already mentioned in the ceremonial code, not homosexuality. And the case of homosexuality has that extra word, "abomination" with it. The case for rejecting homosexual sex begins in Genesis 1-2 with God's original creation of humankind as male and female with man leaving father and mother to become one flesh with woman in order to be fruitful and multiply. You can't multiply through homosexual sex. The original intent of sex had a strong procreation component. The Old Testament view of homosexuality in Leviticus is in agreement with the presentation we get in the Old Testament, homosexual behavior is immoral.

And if I need to, I can go to the New Testament to make the decisive argument. Homosexual behavior is clearly forbidden by Paul in Romans 1:18-32. I am not going to go through that argument right now. I give a longer argument for that in lesson 4 of my previous podcast on Romans. It starts about halfway through the podcast. If you want to see the text, you can find the transcript at observetheword.com, so, Romans lesson 4. The Scripture is very straightforward on this point.

Before moving on, I do want to add that we are talking about immoral behavior. And that is different from desire. There is an important distinction to be made. I have a sin nature. And I cannot do anything about that. Walking with God over time has affected my desires for the good. But I still have sinful desires. Having a sin nature is not the same thing as committing sin. I am not sinning the moment I recognize a sinful desire rise up within me. When I begin to play out sinful desires in my mind then I have begun to sin. I have compassion for any other brother or sister who struggles with sinful desire, including homosexual desire. That may be who you are now, that struggle, that is your reality.

You have to decide what you are going to do with that reality. Who is going to define for you when your desires are in line with what is moral and good and when your desires are calling you to do what is immoral or evil? Our desires are not accurate moral compasses. Who defines which desires are leading to sinful action or not? If you are a Christian, your answer should be, "God does. God defines what desire I should follow." And those sinful desires will not be part of you forever. Neither will my lustful, sinful desires. We are born again now, but we are not yet whole. As Paul says, in Romans 8:23, "We, having the first fruits of the Spirit, even we ourselves groan within ourselves, waiting eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our body." Each one of us groans with sinful desires. I certainly hope we are not condemning one another for the reality of that struggle. Though we are pointing out what is sin, according to God's definition of what is sin. Each one of us is called by God to not act on desires which he has defined as immoral. Our desires are not accurate compasses, and neither is the moral reasoning of our culture. We do not walk in the way of Egypt or the way of Canaan. We walk in the way of God, trusting his definition of what is morally beautiful, good, and true.

Conclusion

So, Torah law establishes a code for civil society. That was for all members of Israelite society. Torah law also calls the members of society to a higher law, to the law of God's heart, a much higher standard, the standard of perfection. The mosaic law challenged the Israelites to consider themselves set apart for holy service. And the New Covenant challenges us to the same. Do you consider yourself set apart from your culture? Do you accept the identity Christian, which is little Christ? Do you own the challenge to be salt and light? Do you trust God to define for you what is morally beautiful, good, and true, even when that definition runs counter to your culture?

We are a people of the book. We proclaim that truth does not come from within. Moral truth must come from God. And it must be communicated objectively by God, and it is through his Word. If we do not live life in line with God, then we lose the sense of what it means to be his, to be Christian, to be set apart. So, let's close with the full challenge to be set apart as salt and light that comes from Jesus in Matthew 5:13-17,

¹³ "You are the salt of the earth; but if the salt has become tasteless, how can it be made salty *again*? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled under foot by men. ¹⁴ You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden; ¹⁵ nor does *anyone* light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all who are in the house. ¹⁶ Let your light shine before men in such a way that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father who is in heaven. ¹⁷ "Do not think that I came to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I did not come to abolish but to fulfill.

Reflection Questions

1. Read Leviticus 18 and then Leviticus 20. What stands out to you as similar and what stands out as different between the two chapters.
2. Read Romans 1:18-35. What connection do you see in Paul regarding idolatry and immoral behavior? How does that connect back to Leviticus 18 and 20? How would you summarize the principle that Paul is communicating? Write it out in your own words.
3. What stands out to you as you read Leviticus 19? What do you notice as interesting or important or strange or confusing? What questions come to mind?
4. The law of Moses functions on two levels. The law of Moses acts a civil law for all members of the whole society. These laws set a low bar meant to curb the effects of sin and produce basic order. The law of Moses also acts as a moral standard, calling believers in God to pursue holiness. Is this a helpful distinction for you to consider as you study the mosaic law or is it not so helpful to you? Do you see examples of both in chapter 19?
5. Being set apart as holy sometimes leads to behavior that is commendable by society. What are some examples of behaviors listed in chapter 19 that non-Christians would probably find commendable or even support you in doing?
6. Being set apart as holy sometimes leads to behavior that is ridiculed, mocked, or opposed by society. What are examples you see in Leviticus 18-20 that would probably bring ridicule or opposition if you set yourself apart from society and took a stand for those moral principles?

Lesson 18: Leviticus 16-17 The Day of Atonement

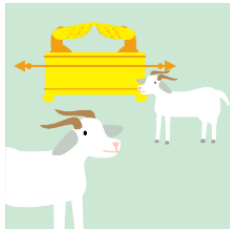
Introduction

| Leviticus: Kingdom Requirements | | | | | | |
|---------------------------------|--------------------|---------------------------|--------------------|----------------------|---------------------|----------------------|
| Key Passage: 19:2 | | | | | | |
| 1-7
Ritual | 8-10
Priesthood | 11-15
Purity | 16-17
Atonement | 18-20
Purity | 21-22
Priesthood | 23-27
Ritual |
| Sacrifices | Consecration | Ceremonial
cleanliness | Substitution | Moral
cleanliness | Standards | Festivals,
etc... |

Leviticus chapters 16 and 17 focus on sacrifice of atonement. Chapter 16 provides Israel with instruction for the Day of Atonement ritual while chapter 17 emphasizes the symbolic importance of blood in Mosaic ritual. The two chapters are pressed together as a single unity by the ceremonial purity code on one side and the moral purity code on the other. In fact, the whole structure of Leviticus starting with the outer ritual sections, then the priesthood sections, then the purity sections funnels our attention inward to chapters 16 and 17. These chapters are the focal point of that chiastic structure.

At the same time, there is a hinge between chapters 16 and 17 that separates them, that separates two major sections of text. For the first part of this lesson, I am going to consider 16 and 17 as the central point of Leviticus, and I am going to focus on the Day of Atonement. Then for the second part of the lesson I will consider the hinge between the two chapters and the two major sections of text that the hinge divides. So, we start with Day of Atonement.

The Day of Atonement (Leviticus 16)



Leviticus majors on providing commands and prohibitions, dos and don'ts. This is the stuff of the second question of covenant, "How then ought I live?" And with so much law to consider and so much challenge to pursue holiness, we can easily miss the extreme theological significance of the monuments of grace that are firmly established in the Torah. All the Levitical laws point centrally into this annual ritual of atonement. Not only does the Day of Atonement take central place in Leviticus, but with Leviticus taking central place in the five books of

Moses, that puts the Day of Atonement at the literal center of the Torah.

We have seen the theological truth of grace with Abraham in Genesis 15. What does it mean that God walks through the sacrificed animals of covenant? If you break covenant with me, then let me die. The holiness that God requires comes as a gift of grace, can only come as a gift of grace. That truth was reaffirmed in Genesis by the almost sacrifice of Isaac. A son must die, but not Isaac. The righteous son of God will die. The ram symbolically took Isaac's place. Then in Exodus 12, God brought wrath down on Egypt, yet gave Israel a covering to escape that wrath. The wages of sin is death, but the blood of the lamb on the doorposts of a house averted the required payment for sin. This monument of grace was established as the most important of Jewish feasts, the Passover feast, a yearly reminder that salvation comes by grace through the blood of the lamb. It was at the Passover meal that Jesus said, take and eat this bread, my body broken for you and drink this wine, my blood spilled out for you. John the Baptist recognized Jesus, announcing him as "the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world." It is his blood that averts the angel of wrath. The Passover is a monument of grace.

Because, so much of the law speaks to the details of life and worship to answer the second question of covenant, it is easy to mistakenly view Torah as a system of works righteousness, as things we must do. In order to correctly understand and apply all the detailed commandments that help God's people answer the second question of covenant, we must correctly answer the first question of

covenant. “How can I, a sinful man or a sinful woman, enter into a sure and loving relationship with my holy, righteous, and pure creator God?” So far, the monuments of grace have taught us it is by grace alone through faith. And it is not the strength of your faith that is critical, but rather the work of God that enables the gift of grace. It is the strength of his righteous character and the strength of his righteous action that enables grace. It is the strength of that, the strength of what God does, that is the critical factor; not your faith.

Now at the center of Torah, the center of the Levitical law with all its teaching on the holiness of God and all the commands and prohibitions, we come again to a monument of grace, repeating again for us the foundational theological truth about relationship with God. To be in relationship with God, you must be holy just as he himself is holy. And that comes to you only as a gift of grace received by faith. That’s the message of the Day of Atonement.

Leviticus 16 starts this way, verses 1-3.

¹ Now the LORD spoke to Moses after the death of the two sons of Aaron, when they had approached the presence of the LORD and died. ² The LORD said to Moses: “Tell your brother Aaron that he shall not enter at any time into the holy place inside the veil, before the mercy seat which is on the ark, or he will die; for I will appear in the cloud over the mercy seat. ³ Aaron shall enter the holy place with this: with a bull for a sin offering and a ram for a burnt offering.”

The death of Aaron’s two sons is brought up again. The holiness of God is not a religious invention. God is holy. He expects his priests to treat him as holy. There is a weightiness, rightly accompanied by fear when entering into the presence of holy God. I wonder how much we miss this in the freedom we have been given in our New Covenant worship. We have so much grace that we miss how dangerous God is. The rituals that teach this have been removed. There is a negative side to ritualistic worship that God has ended. It can so easily fall into a repetitive pattern where the worship is disengaged from the symbolic truths meant to be impressed on the worshiper through the ritual. It is like foot washing, if you have every been a part of a foot washing ceremony. I have two or three times. How do we recapture the emotional and spiritual power impressed on the disciples by Jesus himself doing something so unexpected as to wash their feet? That was a real life situation. A ritual is automatically different. It is quite hard to ritually recreate the impact of a respected leader taking the towel and washbowl of a servant and kneeling down spontaneously to wash the feet of his followers. That spontaneity of Jesus is automatically lost when a foot washing is put on a conference schedule. It can still communicate. It can still be special, especially the first time you let someone wash your feet. But being made into a ritual, it is quite a challenge to maintain the original intent of the experience.

And I wonder what the experience of the first Day of Atonement must have been like that first time. The death of Aaron’s sons had just happened. This was a heavy, serious time. Their death would certainly heighten the sense of respect and awe of any priest who dared enter into the holy place. The whole event was experiential. You see the blood drain out of the bull and the ram and the goat. You watch the priest, dressed in gold and blue and scarlet take that blood and enter into the holy place. The smell of the animals and of blood mixes with the holy incense, a special incense reserved only for the holy place. Life and death are communicated through sight and smell and sound. There is a weightiness, a fear, a holiness to the ritual as Aaron enters into the tent and further into the Holy of Holies where the visible presence of God is manifest.

We learn in this text that Aaron is to never enter into the Holy of Holies except this one day out of the year. And whenever he does, he must make sacrifice. He cannot enter without the blood of a bull. So, here a bull and a ram must be sacrificed for Aaron alone, as atonement for his sin and the sin of his household, the priests. He is a sinful man. He cannot make atonement for the people until first atonement has been made for him. The text also refers twice to the mercy seat. That is what my Bible calls it. Your Bible might call it the lid of atonement or simply the cover. The Hebrew word

being used is a form of the word atonement, which in a basic sense means to cover over and which also means to ransom. The word is referring to the lid on the ark of the covenant. I am going to use the phrase mercy seat because that's what my Bible translation is using, though atonement cover might be better.

After preparing himself through washing and sacrifice for his own sin, Aaron is to take two male goats to make atonement for Israel. This is 16:8-10.

⁸ Aaron shall cast lots for the two goats, one lot for the LORD and the other lot for the scapegoat. ⁹ Then Aaron shall offer the goat on which the lot for the LORD fell, and make it a sin offering. ¹⁰ But the goat on which the lot for the scapegoat fell shall be presented alive before the LORD, to make atonement upon it, to send it into the wilderness as the scapegoat.

Lots are cast for the goats. Dr. Douglas Stuart makes a guess that the lots are like two dice with alternate dark and light sides. Two dark sides would indicate a no, two light sides a yes, and one dark, one light, a try again.⁹ Anyway, some kind of lot is cast to decide which goat will be sacrificed and which goat will be sent out into the wilderness.

Your Bible might use a strange word for the second goat. It is the literal Hebrew azazel. My Bible uses the term scapegoat. In the New American Commentary on Leviticus, Mark Rooker gives us four variant interpretations for this Hebrew word.¹⁰ I will start with the ones I think least likely. First, the apocryphal book *1 Enoch* mentions a demon named Azazel. If that is the idea, then verse 10 would have this goat being presented alive before the Lord and then being sent out to the demon Azazel in the wilderness. It seems very unlikely to me that we would have a random demon named in a holy ceremony of atonement. The wrath of atonement comes from God, not Satan. We are never ransomed from Satan. We are ransomed from the wrath of God. It is God's justice that must be paid back. It is God we owe. *1 Enoch* is not authoritative. And it has this kind of interest in demons. And it came much later than Leviticus. We have no reason to assume that it is giving us a correct interpretation here. A second option is that the term means "entire removal." That option fits with the purpose of the second goat but does not have good linguistic support. A third option, widely accepted in Jewish tradition, sees the root word for "strong" or "fierce" in the word azazel and concludes that azazel is the destination the goat is being sent to. For a fourth option, others see the root words for "go away" and "goat" in the Hebrew azazel. And that would be the "go away goat" or the "scapegoat" as my Bible version puts it.

Whatever the original meaning of the term, the text defines for us the point of second goat. That is not in question. Just the term is in question. But it does not really matter that much. Both goats are said to make atonement for the people. In the atonement of sacrifice animal are always symbolic. It is not a real atonement. As the writer to the Hebrews reminds us in Hebrews 10:4, "It is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins." So, with these two goats we are given two different symbolic truths regarding atonement.

After Aaron sacrifices the bull to cover his own sin. We then have the ceremony of the two goats. The first is in 16:15-16.

¹⁵ Then he shall slaughter the goat of the sin offering which is for the people, and bring its blood inside the veil and do with its blood as he did with the blood of the bull, and sprinkle it on the mercy seat and in front of the mercy seat. ¹⁶ He shall make atonement for the holy place, because of the impurities of the sons of Israel and because of their transgressions in regard to all their sins; and thus he shall do for the tent of meeting which abides with them in the midst of their impurities.

⁹ Rooker, M. F. (2000). *Leviticus* (Vol. 3A, pp. 215–216). Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers.

¹⁰ Rooker, (216).

The blood of the goat is sprinkled on the mercy seat in the Holy of Holies. The mercy seat is the covering of the ark of covenant, so inside the ark is the covenant, the law of Israel. Remember, the law serves two functions. As a minimal bar, the law functions to mitigate the effects of sin in society and to motivate basic good behavior. The law in this sense seems doable. Do not murder. Do not commit adultery. Do not steal. Do not move boundary markers. Do not eat forbidden foods. Celebrate required holidays. A decent person could conceivably keep that law. You probably keep a thousand laws a day in your society because you are a decent person. We could stack up all these criminal law books and you don't break any of those laws.

There are harder laws in Moses that can be challenging even for the decent person. You might be tempted to break the gleaning law if it has been a bad harvest, and you need food for your family, so you are going to go back over your field again instead of leaving it for the poor. Or you might struggle to always show respect to the gray headed person, especially to certain gray headed persons. Paying your full tithe could be a struggle for you in needy times. These may be hard ones for you. They may be easy ones for you. We may need to find others that challenge you personally. Our circumstances and experiences play a lot into which laws we particularly might struggle to keep. Maybe it is the law to love the foreigner, maybe it's the traffic laws. I don't know what you struggle with. These laws may all be doable, but we still struggle. We still don't quite do them all. We struggle with them.

And even if we think we could do all of these civil laws, the law of Moses also functions as a moral code, calling God's people to the highest of standards. On the surface we may think we can follow the first nine commandments of the ten commandments. But then we get to number 10. "Do not covet." How are you doing with that? That's a law of the heart. We can't keep it. We want things that are not ours. We want what has not been given to us by God. We covet other things. We are not satisfied with everything we have. We covet. And if that alone does not trip us up, we are also told, "Love your neighbor as yourself." "Love the Lord with all your heart, mind, and soul." "Be holy as the Lord your God is holy." Is that really required? Is that serious? Who can do that? Love people, love God, be holy. That is all you have to do. And then you will have met the law. The moral requirement of law starts in your heart, "Do not covet," moves out to your words, "Do not curse," and continues on to concrete action, "You shall be careful to perform what goes out of your lips (Deuteronomy 23:23)." Obedience to civil law is expected. There will be criminal punishment for those who break the minimum bar of the legal code. But to enter into relationship with holy God, we are not considering the minimum legal bar of society. We are to pursue holiness in thought, in word, in action. That is the requirement.

On the Day of Atonement, as Aaron enters into the Holy of Holies, God's presence resides above the ark of the covenant. As the true and righteous judge, he looks down into the ark. He looks at the law. And he judges his people guilty. Every last one of them has failed to love God and failed to love their neighbor. The wages of sin is death, eternal separation from holy God. Only the holy can be in relationship with him. Aaron then sprinkles the blood of the goat on the mercy seat. The blood covers the covenant. Death has been made. The penalty of sin is paid. That is the symbolism of the first goat.

Paul refers to the mercy seat in his famous declaration of the gospel in Romans 3:23-25. He uses there the Greek word *hilasterion*, which is the word used by Jewish scholars to translate the Hebrew word for mercy seat. In Greek culture the word *hilasterion* had the idea of satisfying the wrath of the gods. The theological word for that is propitiation. To propitiate God is to satisfy his wrath. Liberal Christian scholars who would separate Jesus from this old holy fear of God want us to believe that God would be so barbaric as to force his son to die on a cross to satisfy his own sense of justice with his blood. They are correct. God would not force his son to do that. The son went willingly. The Jewish translators who used the word *hilasterion* understood that the atonement being made in Leviticus 16 is a propitiation of the wrath of God. God is angry. God's justice demands anger. It demands death for sin. Holy fear is a right emotion when we stand in the presence of a holy God.

Paul understood that God's wrath must be propitiated. And he understood that it would take more than the blood of bulls and goats. This is Romans 3:23-25.

²³ for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, ²⁴ being justified as a gift by His grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus; ²⁵ whom God displayed publicly as a propitiation in His blood through faith. *This was* to demonstrate His righteousness, because in the forbearance of God He passed over the sins previously committed;

"Whom God displayed publicly as a propitiation." The word propitiation here is that word hilasterion, the mercy seat. Your Bible might translate it as sacrifice of atonement. And that is fine. Sacrifice of atonement is that which propitiates. It is the sacrifice that turns away the wrath of God. Jesus is that sacrifice which propitiates the wrath of God. Unlike Aaron, Jesus did not need to make sacrifice for himself before making atonement for us, because unlike Aaron, Jesus is sinless. This is what we needed. A sinless man to take our place. But more than a sinless man. An infinite man. A divine, sinless man who could make payment for the sin of not one other man, but for the sin of every human being that has ever lived or would yet live. Jesus made that payment. And it was satisfactory. That is the righteous action of God that enables grace. Jesus fulfills the symbolism of the Passover lamb and the symbolism of the goat of atonement.

So now, after the blood of this first goat is sprinkled in the Holy of holies over the law, the live goat is sent outside the camp, Leviticus 16:20-22,

²⁰ When he finishes atoning for the holy place and the tent of meeting and the altar, he shall offer the live goat. ²¹ Then Aaron shall lay both of his hands on the head of the live goat, and confess over it all the iniquities of the sons of Israel and all their transgressions in regard to all their sins; and he shall lay them on the head of the goat and send *it* away into the wilderness by the hand of a man who *stands* in readiness. ²² The goat shall bear on itself all their iniquities to a solitary land; and he shall release the goat in the wilderness.

The sacrificed goat paid for the sins of the people. What is the result? The result is that their sin is removed far from them. The second goat symbolizes this result of atonement. Jesus died to pay for your sins. What is the result? Psalm 103:12, "As far as the east is from the west, so far has He removed our transgressions from us." How far is east from west? Eternally far.

The Blood of Atonement (Leviticus 17)

The first 7 verses of Leviticus 17 confirm the desperate need for the day of atonement. The human heart is desperately wicked. At first, in chapter 17 we think we are just reading further regulations about sacrifice. All sacrifice must be brought to the tabernacle. God does not want the people making sacrifice on their own out in the wilderness. He does not trust them. He wants them to bring their sacrifices into the light of the tabernacle worship, to sacrifice openly as part of the community and in conjunction with his priests. The prohibition is not without reason. There was a motivating factor. Considering the Israelites have not set out from Mount Sinai, verse 7 is a bit shocking.

⁷ They shall no longer sacrifice their sacrifices to the goat demons with which they play the harlot. This shall be a permanent statute to them throughout their generations.

What in the world are goat demons? And what are the people doing with the goat demons? This is ridiculous. While still at Mount Sinai, some of the people are sacrificing to lesser gods out in the wilderness. The term could imply goat demons or goat idols or goat gods. Scholars have suggested that they may be the Semitic version of the Greek satyr, the part man, part goat creatures that the Romans called fauns. They would not have been anything as nice as Mr. Tumnus. The Greek version was drunken and lecherous. Perhaps, the Semitic version was connected to fertility.

The debacle of the golden calf is recent. Yet, there persists this problem of idolatry. It is a different kind of idolatry. The golden calf was meant to be Yahweh. That was the sin of molding God into a human vision of God. And it was performed on a national level in connection to the national God. Sacrifice to the goat gods is the idolatry of the common man. We know that God cares about the big

things. He is the national God. But what about the little things? What about success at my job? What about my crops and my family and my relationships? We need leverage. We need power to get things done. We need our personal, individual idols to help us manage the more day to day needs of the average person. We need a God who understands the desires, the needs of the average person.

And ancient people knew where to get this power from. There were plenty of greater and lesser gods to seek out. Some people today do something similar when they look at the horoscope or when they are praying to particular saints. We are seeking out lesser gods to help us out. Many modern Christians understand they have to be more practical. We know we are only supposed to pray to the one God. We do not have the option of seeking spiritual power in other places. So, we do it ourselves. We seek success and fulfillment in education or in relationship or in career or in a stuff or in a sports team or through entertainment or by escape into the internet or escape into something darker. These are the names of our gods. We give our hearts to a multitude of sources, either to control our circumstances, or to feel self-worth, or experience pleasure. That's why people have always made sacrifices to the idols, for power, for identity, for pleasure. And whenever a good thing God has made provides for us what we ought to find in relationship with God, that thing has become an idol. Everything I just named, except for the darker things, everything I just named is something to be enjoyed as a provision of God, but which has the potential of taking the place of God.

The sin of the Israelites was clearer. They were making illicit sacrifice to false gods. So, God commanded that all sacrifice be brought to the tabernacle. Maybe there is something there for us. Is there anything in my life that I could not bring to church, that I could not bring to God's holy community and lay down before God, to thank God for it and to give it over to God? Is there anything I can't bring into the light, I can't put into his hands? Is there anything that I want to hide, that I want to hold onto as a source of life, that I can't absolutely give up? Then maybe that is for me a goat demon.

So, as I have said, the golden calf and the goat demons represent two kinds of idolatry: the calf is the molding of God into a human idea. And we have already talked a lot about that, making God more appropriate for our society. The goat demon is a seeking of life outside of relationship with God. In the narrative of the Torah, the first is particularly attached to the priesthood, the second to the people. So, though the people urged Aaron to mold the calf, he was the focus of that story. The priesthood failed the people by failing to stand up for God's revealed vision of himself. That is the job of the priests, to hold on to the revealed word and to make that word known, to hold onto the right vision of who God is or the revealed vision of who God is. With the goat demons, no priests were implicated. This is a sin of the people.

John Sailhamer in his commentary, *The Pentateuch as Narrative*, suggests a major division of laws indicated by these two sins of idolatry. So, there is a hinge between chapter 16 and chapter 17. The Golden Calf incident occurred back in Exodus 32. Then there was a renewal of covenant and then Exodus 35 through Leviticus 16 contains narrative and laws focused on the priestly code and the tabernacle. Leviticus 17 tells us about goat idols and from Leviticus 18-26 proceeds on with everyday laws for individual people. It is not a perfect division. We have laws for the priests in 21 and 22. And we have the cleanliness laws that affect everyday life in 11-15. But there is enough in this division to make us notice. The golden calf is followed by priestly laws and then the goat idols followed by everyday laws. Idolatry tempts us away from right worship of God at the tabernacle and idolatry tempts us from a right walk with God in everyday life.

It is also interesting to note that the law for the sin offering requires the sacrifice of a bull if made by the priest, there again is a connection to the golden calf, that calf goes with the priest, and the sacrifice for the sin offering is a goat if made by one of the people, connecting with the goat demons. So, we see this in Leviticus 4 with the law of sin offering, and we see it also here in Leviticus 16 with the regulations for the Day of Atonement. Aaron had to sacrifice a bull or a calf for himself and then a goat for the people. So, the golden calf and the sin offering of a calf are connected to the priesthood while the goat idols and the sin offering of a goat are connected to the people.

| | | | |
|------------------------------|--|--------------------------------|---|
| Golden Calf

Exodus 32 | Priestly laws
(Calf sin offering)

Exodus 35-Leviticus 16 | Goat idols

Leviticus 17 | Everyday laws
(Goat sin offering)

Leviticus 18-26 |
|------------------------------|--|--------------------------------|---|

(Sailhamer, 345.)

Both these forms of idolatry persist today, both the molding of God into a more appropriate image for society and the seeking of power and fulfillment outside of relationship with God. The Levitical law teaches us to receive our vision of God from his own word and to bring our desires to his house, entrusting our everyday needs and wants into his hands.

One last word on Leviticus 17. The text emphasizes here the importance of blood in the Mosaic law. Israelites are to treat blood respectfully. They are forbidden to eat blood of any kind. Blood has a high symbolic importance in Mosaic law. The reason for that is given in Leviticus 17:11,

¹¹ For the life of the flesh is in the blood, and I have given it to you on the altar to make atonement for your souls; for it is the blood by reason of the life that makes atonement.

The reasoning made here is symbolic. This is not a scientific statement about blood. It is not a magical statement about blood. It is not a spiritual statement about blood, not in the sense that somehow a person's soul is in the blood. This is a symbolic statement. When a bull or a lamb, offered as a sacrifice, has its jugular vein cut and the blood spills out, as that blood drains from the body, the life of the animal drains from its eyes. It drains from its body. Slowly, the animal becomes lifeless. The blood is a visual picture of the life draining out. The blood represents the giving up of life. God says here that he has given the blood to make atonement for the souls of the people. The blood of bulls and goats symbolized a life given up to cover the sins of the people and turn away the wrath of God. Satisfaction is made. Remember Romans 3:23-25,

²³ for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, ²⁴ being justified as a gift by His grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus; ²⁵ whom God displayed publicly as a propitiation in His blood through faith. *This was* to demonstrate His righteousness, because in the forbearance of God He passed over the sins previously committed;

"In the forbearance of God he passed over the sins previously committed." That means God accepted the blood of bulls and goats only as symbolic payment. Justice was not satisfied at all by those sacrifices. If Christ had not died, God could be charged as an unjust judge, who lets the guilty go free without payment for their crimes. That's not justice. The death of Christ paid for all the people who lived before him and all who come after him. This was to demonstrate God's righteousness because in his forbearance he passed over the sins previously committed. How are Abraham's sins paid for? By the cross. They were looking forward to something that must happen. We look backward. We remember the true sacrifice of Christ on our behalf every time we take the Lord's supper. His body was broken for us. His blood was poured out. It is the blood of the New Covenant. It is the true payment for sin. By his blood our sin is covered over and sent out from us as far as the East is from the West.

Reflection Questions

1. What stands out to you as you read Leviticus 16-17? What do you notice as interesting or important or strange or confusing? What questions come to mind?
2. Compare the ceremony in Leviticus 16:15-22 and the description of blood as the life of the sacrifice in 17:10-13 with Paul's reference to the mercy seat in Romans 3:23-25. What stands out to you as important or maybe as confusing when you observe the two texts?
3. What are some of the "goat demons" that tempt Christians in your society? Whereas the golden calf represents molding Yahweh to fit modern society, goat idols represent the search outside of relationship with God for means to gain identity, control, or pleasure in life.

- a. What are some things believers pursue to help them gain a sense of identity? What makes us feel included or important or valuable?
 - b. What are some things believers pursue to gain control over their situation? This could be something spiritual or something relational or something physical. What helps you control the circumstances of life?
 - c. What are some things believers pursue to feel good?
4. What is the difference between a good gift from God that helps us feel good or helps us succeed and an idol of the heart that takes the place of God? How do you know when something God has become an idol?
5. What steps can you take avoid giving something good the place of an idol in your life?

Lesson 19: Numbers 1-10 Mosaic Law and Women

Introduction

The Overall Structure of Numbers

The book of Numbers: Israel is leaving Mount Sinai. The Bible Project provides an excellent video overview of Numbers, if you want to check that out at observetheword.com. Numbers is notoriously challenging to structure. Every commentary lines things up a little differently. The Bible project division is nice, viewing the book as a travel log, they see Israel camped at three locations and traveling in between, which makes a five-part division of the book. In the first chapter the people are still at Mt. Sinai, then they are on the move, then they camp at Paran, then they are on the move, and they end up in Moab, just across the Jordan river from Canaan.

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|----------------------------|-----------------|----------------------------|----------------|---------------------------|
| The Wilderness of
Sinai | Travel | The Wilderness
of Paran | Travel | The Wilderness of
Moab |
| Chapters 1-10a | Chapters 10b-12 | Chapters 13-19 | Chapters 20-21 | Chapters 22-36 |

That's a helpful perspective. I prefer a simpler three-part division of the book. There is one literary element that clearly stands out in the book of Numbers. It is where the book gets its name. God tells Moses to take a census of all the men of fighting age, 20 years and older. And the report of that first census comes right away at the beginning of chapter 1. And then much later God commands Moses to take a second census which is recorded in chapter 26. A full report is given, just like the first census, with a list of all the fighting men over 20 from each tribe.

| | | |
|--------------------------------|-------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| Numbers: Kingdom Rebellion | | |
| Key Passage: 14:20-23 | | |
| 1:1-10:10 | 10:11-25:18 | 26-36 |
| Preparation to enter the land | Wandering in the desert | Preparation to enter the land |
| Census of the first generation | Death of the first generation | Census of the second generation |

The first census counts up the fighting men of the first generation out of Egypt before they set out for the promise land. The second census counts up the fighting men of the second generation after they have arrived in the wilderness of Moab and before they enter the promise land. The text in between, from 10:11 to the end of chapter 25, tells the story of Israel wandering in the wilderness. So, there is a census at the beginning and a census at the end with 40 years of wandering in between. Along with a census, the beginning and ending sections also are mostly laws related to entering the land. There is no death of Israelites recorded in those two sections at the beginning and end. And that's even though there is a major battle after the second census. There must have been death. But no death is mentioned. All the recorded deaths in Numbers occur in that middle section, emphasizing the rebellion of the first generation and the consequence of that rebellion. That point is made after the second census in Numbers 26:63-65.

⁶³ These are those who were numbered by Moses and Eleazar the priest, who numbered the sons of Israel in the plains of Moab by the Jordan at Jericho. ⁶⁴ But among these there was not a man of those who were numbered by Moses and Aaron the priest, who numbered the sons of Israel in the wilderness of Sinai. ⁶⁵ For the LORD had said of them, "They shall surely die in the wilderness." And not a man was left of them, except Caleb the son of Jephunneh and Joshua the son of Nun.

The Theological Point of the Census

When you look at the numbers from the first and second census side by side, the numbers remain fairly consistent with a little bit of change. Only Manasseh has a large gain growing from 32,200 to 52,700. And only Simeon has a great loss dropping from 59,300 to 22,200. I am not sure what to

make of the growth of Manasseh, though it does justify half of the tribe settling on the east side of the Jordan and the other half-tribe settling on the west side in Canaan. The loss of numbers in Simeon fits with the prophecy by Jacob in Genesis 49:7 that they would be dispersed and scattered through Israel. We mentioned that before because that prophecy was given to both Simeon and Levi. And Levi is going to be dispersed as the priests. So, they do not have their own inheritance but are dispersed throughout. The census shows that Simeon dropped by more than half. And then once in the promise land, Simeon is going to settle in the midst of Judah and is never referred to again.

| Tribe | Reference | Figures | Reference | Figures |
|-----------|-----------|---------|-----------|---------|
| Reuben | 1:20-21 | 46,500 | 26:5-11 | 43,730 |
| Simeon | 1:22-23 | 59,300 | 26:12-14 | 22,200 |
| Gad | 1:24-25 | 45,650 | 26:15-18 | 40,500 |
| Judah | 1:26-27 | 74,600 | 26:19-22 | 76,500 |
| Issachar | 1:28-29 | 54,400 | 26:23-25 | 64,300 |
| Zebulun | 1:30-31 | 57,400 | 26:26-27 | 60,500 |
| Ephraim | 1:32-33 | 40,500 | 26:35-37 | 32,500 |
| Manasseh | 1:34-35 | 32,200 | 26:28-34 | 52,700 |
| Benjamin | 1:36-37 | 35,400 | 26:38-41 | 45,600 |
| Dan | 1:38-39 | 62,700 | 36:42-43 | 64,400 |
| Asher | 1:40-41 | 41,500 | 36:44-47 | 53,400 |
| Naphatali | 1:42-43 | 53,400 | 26:48-50 | 45,400 |
| Totals | | 603,550 | | 601,730 |
| Average | | 50,296 | | 50,144 |
| High | | 74,600 | | 76,500 |
| Low | | 32,200 | | 22,200 |

The big theological point of the census, however, is in the bottom line. At Sinai, the number of fighting men is recorded at 603,550. After 40 years in the desert, and the dying off of the entire first generation, the number of fighting men has only dropped by only 1800 men, down to 601,730. Remember that the Pentateuch was not written for the first generation out of Egypt. They have all died. Moses wrote the Pentateuch for the second generation. He is giving them the answer to three essential questions: (1) Who is our God? (2) Who are we? (3) What's our mission?

The record of the census speaks this message to this generation of Israelites. "Here is the reality. God rescued your parents out of Egypt. He cut covenant with them at Sinai. He promised to give them the fertile land of Canaan, they got there, and they rebelled. They refused to go in. You are camped now on the wrong side of the Jordan river. What are you going to do? You do not have any more or any less fighting men than they had. Your situation is essentially the exact same as their situation. You have the same opportunity your parents had. But it is not on them any more. It is on you. It is your turn. This is the time for your generation. What are you going to do?"

The book of Numbers leaves that question open. We do not know what this second generation out of Egypt is going to do. And in a sense, it is a question that never ends. Every generation must face the same question. You must face the same question. We must face the question. "This is not written for your fathers. This is written for you. What will you do? Turn away? Or step up in faith?"

Over the next several lessons, we are going to consider the narrative of Numbers and look at some significant passages in that narrative. There is a lot of law in Numbers, more dos and don'ts than we have in either Exodus or Deuteronomy. But mostly we have met our objective for this series in regard to the law. We are not taking a verse by verse walk through the Pentateuch. This is an overview to help equip you in your own understanding and study. So, we will not spend much more time in the law code here in Numbers. The book is a reminder that the legal dos and don'ts of Torah come to us in the context of narrative. We normally think of Numbers as a book of narrative, the wandering of the Israelites. But it has got law all over the place. Mostly in the beginning and end, but even a little in the very middle. The law of Moses is not abstracted out of real-life narrative. The law is embedded in the context of story and God's interaction with his people.

I do want to address one legal issue while we are in Numbers. And I am going to go ahead and do that, since the relevant passage is here among the law code of the first major section of Numbers, which is 1:1-10:10. While discussing the cleanliness code in Leviticus, we recognized that various mosaic laws seem to devalue or even degrade women. We noticed that a woman is unclean longer for the birth of a girl than the birth of the boy. I promised to come back to that problem. So, that's the issue I want to address in this lesson. I have given you a brief overview here of the book of Numbers and the three-part structure. Now we are going to address the question of whether the laws of Moses devalue women. And we are going to start with a very odd text in Numbers 5, then I will address one other text from Deuteronomy and one from Leviticus.

How should we view laws that seem to degrade women?

The Adultery Test (Numbers 5:1-31)

Numbers 5:1-31 is quite odd. I am going to read the whole thing because I want you to listen and allow yourself to respond to the text, emotionally, rationally, whatever. Don't try to spiritualize it. Just take it in as a law of society. This is Numbers 5:1-31.

¹¹ Then the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, ¹² "Speak to the sons of Israel and say to them, 'If any man's wife goes astray and is unfaithful to him, ¹³ and a man has intercourse with her and it is hidden from the eyes of her husband and she is undetected, although she has defiled herself, and there is no witness against her and she has not been caught in the act, ¹⁴ if a spirit of jealousy comes over him and he is jealous of his wife when she has defiled herself, or if a spirit of jealousy comes over him and he is jealous of his wife when she has not defiled herself, ¹⁵ the man shall then bring his wife to the priest, and shall bring *as* an offering for her one-tenth of an ephah of barley meal; he shall not pour oil on it nor put frankincense on it, for it is a grain offering of jealousy, a grain offering of memorial, a reminder of iniquity. ¹⁶ 'Then the priest shall bring her near and have her stand before the LORD, ¹⁷ and the priest shall take holy water in an earthenware vessel; and he shall take some of the dust that is on the floor of the tabernacle and put *it* into the water. ¹⁸ 'The priest shall then have the woman stand before the LORD and let *the hair of* the woman's head go loose, and place the grain offering of memorial in her hands, which is the grain offering of jealousy, and in the hand of the priest is to be the water of bitterness that brings a curse. ¹⁹ 'The priest shall have her take an oath and shall say to the woman, "If no man has lain with you and if you have not gone astray into uncleanness, *being* under *the authority of* your husband, be immune to this water of bitterness that brings a curse; ²⁰ if you, however, have gone astray, *being* under *the authority of* your husband, and if you have defiled yourself and a man other than your husband has had intercourse with you" ²¹ (then the priest shall have the woman swear with the oath of the curse, and the priest shall say to the woman), "the LORD make you a curse and an oath among your people by the LORD'S making your thigh waste away and your abdomen swell; ²² and this water that brings a curse shall go into your stomach, and make your abdomen swell and your thigh waste away." And the woman shall say, "Amen. Amen." ²³ 'The priest shall then write these curses on a scroll, and he shall wash them off into the water of bitterness. ²⁴ 'Then he shall make the woman drink the water of bitterness that brings a curse, so that the water which brings a curse will go

into her and *cause* bitterness.²⁵ 'The priest shall take the grain offering of jealousy from the woman's hand, and he shall wave the grain offering before the LORD and bring it to the altar;²⁶ and the priest shall take a handful of the grain offering as its memorial offering and offer *it* up in smoke on the altar, and afterward he shall make the woman drink the water.²⁷ 'When he has made her drink the water, then it shall come about, if she has defiled herself and has been unfaithful to her husband, that the water which brings a curse will go into her and *cause* bitterness, and her abdomen will swell and her thigh will waste away, and the woman will become a curse among her people.²⁸ 'But if the woman has not defiled herself and is clean, she will then be free and conceive children.²⁹ 'This is the law of jealousy: when a wife, *being* under *the authority of* her husband, goes astray and defiles herself,³⁰ or when a spirit of jealousy comes over a man and he is jealous of his wife, he shall then make the woman stand before the LORD, and the priest shall apply all this law to her.³¹ 'Moreover, the man will be free from guilt, but that woman shall bear her guilt.'"

What's your response to this law? How does it make you feel? I generally get two responses from students. One, this is a really strange ritual, almost like magic. Two, it is really unfair to women. If the husband is jealous, why does the woman have to be put through all of that humiliation just to satisfy his suspicions? And what about the man? What is the woman is jealous? Why is there only a law making the woman go through a ceremony and not the man?

Old Testament law was written into a very different culture. One of the purposes of law was to mitigate the damage of sin in society while promoting basic order. And as we saw in a previous lesson, with the certificate of divorce, some of the laws are given not to express God's desired will for human relationships, but to minimize the effects of hard hearts. And it may be that some of the laws which seem to dishonor women were actually there to protect women. I think that is the case with this adultery test.

Let's think about what the situation in ancient Israel might have been like. What happens if a man becomes jealous of his wife, convinced she is unfaithful? In an ancient culture, the man is convinced his wife is committing adultery, what might be the result? Well, if it stands on the testimony of the one man alone, she might be executed. Or if she has a child, the jealous husband could deny that child's legitimacy, labelling the child a bastard. What law exists to protect the public reputation of a woman suspected by her husband.

The case here of a woman performing a ritual and then God being called to punish her has some similarity to the ancient idea of trial by ordeal. The Law of Hammurabi from 18th century Babylonian employs trial by ordeal. Here are a couple of excerpts from the Law of Hammurabi. The first sets up the idea. The second applies the idea to adultery.

If anyone bring an accusation against a man, and the accused go to the river and leap into the river, if he sink in the river his accuser shall take possession of his house. But if the river prove that the accused is not guilty, and he escape unhurt, then he who had brought the accusation shall be put to death, while he who leaped into the river shall take possession of the house that had belonged to his accuser (Hammurabi's code, paragraph 2)

It is really important to know that swimming was not a skill recognized and taught in the ancient world. Ancient Near Eastern people had a great fear of the water because they didn't know how to swim. In this law, the person who jumps in the river is expected to drown. If they do, the river god has judged them guilty. If they somehow live, then the river god has saved them, proving their innocence.

Here is the part that applies to adultery.

If the "finger is pointed" at a man's wife about another man, but she is not caught sleeping with the other man, she shall jump into the river for her husband. (Hammurabi's code, paragraph 132).

If the “finger is pointed” means a wife has been accused and that wife is expected to jump into the river. Does not sound so bad until we realize that Ancient Near Eastern wives could not swim. What is the expected result of the woman who jumps in the river for her husband? Well, she is going to drown. Imagine jumping in a river never having learned to swim. And that’s the Old Babylonian test for adultery.

Now, when we go back to the test in the Numbers 5, what does the woman have to do and what is the expected result? Some dirt from the tabernacle floor is mixed with holy water along with the ink used to write out the curse, and then the woman drinks it. What do we expect to happen? Absolutely nothing. This should have no affect at all. Drinking a little dirt and ink is not going to have any effect, much less make your abdomen swell and thigh waste away. The Babylonian code assumes guilt unless miraculously proven innocent. The Hebrew code assumes innocence unless miraculously proven guilty.

Now let’s consider again the reality of honor and shame. This would be a shameful ritual for the woman to have to go through. But in the end, she is, in all likelihood, going to be publicly justified. Her honor is restored by the ritual. The man, on the other hand, is going to be publicly shamed. He has voluntarily admitted that he thinks his wife has gone to another man. That is pretty shameful. But then, after the ritual, he is going to be shown in public to have been wrong and to have exposed his wife to a shame she did not deserve. And that is going to be even more shameful for him.

One student commented how unfair this law is. The man could bring her again and again before the priest anytime he feels jealous. First, if the priests are decent men at all, I do not think they would let a man continue to subject his wife to this ceremony again and again when she is again and again proven innocent. Second, the ceremony shames the man. So, I do not see this happening whether the priests allow it or not. You do not do this over and over. You don’t want that kind of public shame. Third, yes, it is unfair. Yes, it is certainly unfair that a decent woman has her character questioned and must then go through a public ritual. Law is often dealing with the unfair and the unjust, struggling to minimize the effect of sin in already broken human relationships. The law is not going to fix this broken relationship. It is only minimizing the effect on the woman.

I do not think that this law is teaching the high moral standard of what God desires for his people. God desires for husbands and wives that they join together as one flesh and walk together in love, respect, trust, and mutual forgiveness. But people are sinful, and relationships are often dysfunctional. So, some of the laws exist to mitigate the damage of that dysfunction, of that sin. A truly righteous person would act according to a much higher standard. Think of Joseph. Mary was pregnant. He was one of two people absolutely sure that he was not the father. He had never slept with Mary. Her infidelity was clear to any sane man. But he did not bring her up on public charges for breaking the betrothal. He did not accuse her before the priests. He did not ask for some kind of ritual to be performed. He was not yet married, so he simply sought a quiet end to the engagement. That is the behavior of a righteous man. He shows his character further when Gabriel tells him that Mary is still a virgin who is miraculously pregnant. He believes God and goes ahead with the marriage, even though the pregnancy is proof to everyone that Joseph must have slept with Mary before marriage. He takes the shame on himself. So, with this law in Numbers, we are not looking at it as the right course of action for a righteous man to follow. It is not that kind of law. It is a law mitigating sin in society. What is the point of the law?

The language of this law is stated from the man’s perspective and comes across as being against the woman. But I think, in reality, this law exists to protect that woman who is in a very difficult situation. If she is required to go through the ceremony, then she has public and legal proof that she did not commit adultery. Unless something strange happens and her abdomen swells and her thigh wastes away. If what we expect to happen happens then she has proof that she is not an adulterer. And there is no reason to believe that she is not going to be justified through the ritual. The outcome of the law is completely in her favor. The protection afforded by the law applies to her and also to the

status of a child born at the time of the accusation. Legally, she has been publicly justified and any child has been publicly proven to belong to the father. The child is legally legitimate.

Culture matters a lot when we look into these laws. Let's consider next the law. It is the one I have been using as an example that one of the functions of law is to provide a legal code that mitigates the effects of evil in society. This is the law quoted to Jesus by the Pharisees, regarding a certificate of divorce. It is in Deuteronomy 24:1-4.

The Certificate of Divorce (Deuteronomy 24:1-4)

¹ "When a man takes a wife and marries her, and it happens that she finds no favor in his eyes because he has found some indecency in her, and he writes her a certificate of divorce and puts *it* in her hand and sends her out from his house, ² and she leaves his house and goes and becomes another man's *wife*, ³ and if the latter husband turns against her and writes her a certificate of divorce and puts *it* in her hand and sends her out of his house, or if the latter husband dies who took her to be his wife, ⁴ *then* her former husband who sent her away is not allowed to take her again to be his wife, since she has been defiled; for that is an abomination before the LORD, and you shall not bring sin on the land which the LORD your God gives you as an inheritance.

The focus of this law is not on the certificate of divorce. This is case law that assumes a certificate of divorce and it focuses on a particular question about divorce. If a woman is divorced from one man, and then remarries, if she is again divorced or her husband dies, can she remarry her first husband? The answer is, "No." This law answers a specific question, but in doing so raises a number of other questions that are not addressed in the Torah. It is another reminder of how little law we are given in the Pentateuch. Whereas modern society may have a whole book on divorce law or books on divorce law, the Torah only has a few verses. It is not enough to put into practice. Other decisions have to be made. The leaders of Israel would have to fill in the law in order to put it into practice.

For example, under what circumstances could a husband write a certificate of divorce? We are not told. This was the ongoing debate the Pharisees tried to draw Jesus into. A group of Pharisees argued that anything the husband defined as indecent was justification for a certificate of divorce. If he didn't like the way she cooked dinner that was indecent, and she could be given a certificate of divorce. Another group of Pharisees argued that there must be some proof of something legally defined as indecent. Jesus indicates that the law was not given to make divorce easy. So, I assume that the second group was right, that the intent of God was not that a man could easily dismiss his wife. She must truly have committed indecency according to the law of Moses. If she was found to have lied about being a virgin when she got married or if she failed the adultery test or some proof of indecency could be shown, then a certificate of divorce could be granted. It wasn't required. A righteous man might not write out a certificate of divorce. But if that kind of indecency was shown to be true then it could be granted. And that's the kind of argumentation that would have to happen in order for leaders of Israel to apply this law. They have to fill out the law, according to what is not actually written or explained in Torah. The text does not say what the requirements must be, so we leave that up to the elders and priests and judges to determine. They have to fill out what God has not provided.

This is a case law about whether a woman can remarry her previous husband in the event that she has already been given a certificate of divorce. The answer is clear, "No, she cannot." And the reason is not given. And I am not sure exactly what the reason is. There is an issue of that being some kind of defilement. There seems to be a moral issue. There may also be other issues. I am right now teaching a course for a church in Zagreb that has a great ministry to asylum seekers from the Middle East. It just dawned on me recently one night as I was teaching Old Testament, I was teaching the Old Testament to two Persians, an Assyrian, and an Egyptian. Talk about biblical. They affirmed to me that some Muslim cultures in the Middle East allow a man to divorce his wife, simply by repeating three times, "I divorce you. I divorce you. I divorce you." There is no going before a judge. No

certificate necessary. You do not need to involve the priest. I have been told that this law has been abused for the sake of sex and money. If a man divorces his wife and goes on a long trip, say, on a pilgrimage to a different country and has sex with a woman on the trip, then he is technically not committing adultery. Maybe it is sin, but it is not that bad sin, according to the custom. And when he returns home, he can remarry his wife. So, a man could also divorce his wife for purposes of taxes or inheritance or dowry, if there is some reason it is going to work out better if the wife is divorced. And then he can remarry her after the matter is settled in his favor. So, there is this potential of abuse of easily divorcing. And this law is preventing using easy divorce as a loophole to get out of other laws.

Purification Period After Birth (Leviticus 12:1-8)

Our third text is in Leviticus, so let's go back to the ceremonial law regarding a woman after birth. In Leviticus, we touched on the symbolism. The mother is not spiritually unclean when she gives birth. She is only symbolically unclean. And that was true anytime a man or woman came into contact with blood. And it fit with the sacredness of things associated with birth and with death. So, then there was a ritual, a simple ritual to go through to become clean again. And I also suggested that there was a benefit for the woman being declared ritually unclean after birth which resulted in an enforced period of convalescence at home. She had to be home a month. She was required to not go out and work and to not join in with communal worship. And that helps us when we think about this law in general that maybe there was a benefit in the woman being declared ceremonially unclean. It is not shameful to be declared unclean after birth. There is great honor in giving birth. It is a ceremonial issue. But why the difference between the birth of a son and the birth of a daughter? Here is that section in Leviticus 12:1-5.

¹ Then the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, ² "Speak to the sons of Israel, saying: 'When a woman gives birth and bears a male child, then she shall be unclean for seven days, as in the days of her menstruation she shall be unclean. ³ 'On the eighth day the flesh of his foreskin shall be circumcised. ⁴ Then she shall remain in the blood of her purification for thirty-three days; she shall not touch any consecrated thing, nor enter the sanctuary until the days of her purification are completed. ⁵ But if she bears a female child, then she shall be unclean for two weeks, as in her menstruation; and she shall remain in the blood of her purification for sixty-six days.' "

Again, I do not know the full reasoning. I am just wondering whether there is any cultural explanation. One thought has come to mind regarding female circumcision. The law requires circumcision of the boy and then adds extra days for the baby girl that covers the lack of circumcision for the girl. I mean, with a boy cleanliness came after one week and then circumcision and then 33 days. If cleanliness came after a week and 33 days for the girl then something is missing because the boy also has circumcision. But instead of circumcision for the girl, cleanliness comes by doubling the period. She has two weeks at the beginning and then 66 days. So, the extra days for the girl are in place of being circumcised.

While the argument can be made that male circumcision has positive health benefits and certainly does not have any significant negative effects, female circumcision is painful, medically dangerous, and leads to lasting negative effects. And again, my Middle Eastern friends in my class affirmed to me that there are Muslim cultures today that still practice female circumcision. We do not have examples all the way back to the days of Moses, but we do have examples going back to approaching the time of Moses. There are cultures, there were then, there are now, that practice this awful ritual of female circumcision. Israelites never practiced female circumcision. I believe this law is one of the reasons why. It is clear here that something else must be provided in place of circumcision for the baby girl. Circumcision is not an option. Instead the time period is doubled. I do not think this law is meant to devalue girls. I think it is intended to make the two cases basically equal. The male has circumcision plus a period of time. But the female has no circumcision but two periods of time.

These three passages provide test cases on how to interpret mosaic laws that seem to devalue women. There are other challenging passages. I will leave those for you to observe and to consider.

The Old Testament is rough and real. It confronts sin head on in real society. And much of it we readily relate to. We see ourselves, good and bad, in the characters of the Bible. We see our own culture in the laws required. It is amazing how much still applies to us 3000 years, more than 3000 years later. But then, much of it is strange and disturbing. It doesn't fit or apply to our culture. And we don't understand what the point is. The last thing we want to do is just whitewash the Bible, to cover over the rough spots and act as though it is not even there. On the other hand, for those of us who believe in Christ, we also accept his claim that he came to fulfill the law. Christ's followers declared the law of Moses to be holy, righteous, and good (Romans 7:12). They did not do away with it because it was unjust. God did away with it because something better had come in Christ, a new wine skin, a new covenant. But looking back

But looking back at the law's teaching in regard to woman, I keep two basic principles in mind. First, God established the equal worth and dignity of men and women in the very first chapter of the Bible, Genesis 1:27, when he declared humankind to be created in his image, male and female he created them. Second, the Mosaic law is holy, righteous, and good. And some passages bring these two principles into tension. How can it be holy, righteous, and good? This doesn't look like there is equality or equal valuing. Those are challenging verses. So, I proceed on certain assumptions. I recommend these to you. When reading passages that seem to devalue women:

Assume that cultural realities you do not understand may be involved.

Assume the laws are for a society in which women were at considerably more risk than your modern society.

Consider whether the particular law exists as part of the civil law meant to mitigate sin in a hardened, sinful society.

Consider whether other principles exist in the Torah that call believers to a higher standard of behavior than that which is required by the civil code.

Do not whitewash the Bible. Let the rough parts stand whether you understand them or not.

Do not speak mockingly or skeptically about something you may not yet fully understand in the Word of God. It is still the Word of God.

We are going to trouble over some texts for years. We can't live with them, and we can't live without them. We may never get them. We may never become comfortable with them. We entrust them by faith to God.

Inheritance to daughters (Numbers 27:1-11)

In conclusion, I'd like to mention one more example. Along with laws that seem to devalue women, there are also texts that show the equality of women in the eyes of God. Looking back at the book of Numbers as a three-part work, the first part and last part are marked off by the two censuses of the two generations. These two parts mostly contain law code, regarding entry into the promise land. The passage on the adultery test came in chapter 5. That's in the first major section of Numbers. The laws in the last major section of Numbers are marked off by a question about inheritance for women. That question is addressed at the beginning of that law code in Numbers 27 and then again at the law code in Numbers 36.

This is the context. In the tribe of Manasseh, there was a man named Zelophehad. And Zelophehad was of that first generation out of Egypt. He died along with all the members of his generation. He had no sons, but he did have five daughters, Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah, Milcah, and Tirzah. These daughters come to Moses with a concern. This is Numbers 27:4.

"Why should the name of our father be withdrawn from among his family because he had no son? Give us a possession among our father's brothers."

What do you think Moses said back to these women? "Why do you speak among the men, you greedy women. Get back in your tents."

No. Moses accepted the complaint as something to look into. The law so far given by God does not say anything about this question. So, Moses goes to God. Something similar had happened earlier and was recorded in the first major section of Numbers. Some Israelites who were unclean during the Passover could not celebrate it. They want to know if it is okay if they celebrated the Passover on a different day. And like the daughters of Zelophehad, they came to Moses with a complaint, asking for clarification. And Moses did not presume to answer himself, but said, "Wait, and I will listen to what the LORD will command (Numbers 9:8)." These two examples fit with what we have been saying about the Law. It does not answer every question. These two cases also indicate to the leaders of Israel how to go about answering the unanswered questions. They are to seek wisdom from God in prayer. Just as Moses went to God in the earlier case back in chapter 9, we see the same thing here in 27:5. It says, "Moses brought their case before the LORD." That is the case of the daughters of Zelophehad.

So, what do you think God said about these daughters who want to claim the inheritance of their father? This is Numbers 27:6-8.

⁶ Then the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, ⁷ "The daughters of Zelophehad are right in their statements. You shall surely give them a hereditary possession among their father's brothers, and you shall transfer the inheritance of their father to them. ⁸ Further, you shall speak to the sons of Israel, saying, 'If a man dies and has no son, then you shall transfer his inheritance to his daughter.'"

God hears their request and grants them inheritance. God values the daughters of his Israel. To accurately understand God's perspective of women in the Torah, we can't just look at the problematic verses. We need to look at those tough passages. We also need to look at other passages like this one that show God's positive valuing of women. God does not say, "Honor your father." But that would have been perfectly fine in the ancient world. That would have been all they expected. Nobody expects anything more. But that is not the command we get from God. "Honor your father and mother," that's the command of God. The mothers of Israel are to be honored. The book of numbers is issuing a challenge to the current generation. And it is not just a challenge to the men. It is a challenge to the entire generation, to the mothers and fathers, to the sons and the daughters. Are you going to step up in faith? Genesis 1 and 2 present Adam and Eve as a partners. They are both commissioned together, to multiply together, to rule together, and to display the image of God together.

Reflection Questions

1. Choose one of the examples used in this lesson of texts from the Torah that could seem to communicate a prejudice against women. Observe the text closely. What do you see?
 - a. The Adultery Text (Numbers 5:1-31)
 - b. The Certificate of Divorce (Deuteronomy 24:1-4)
 - c. Purification Period after Birth (Leviticus 12:1-8)
 - d. Inheritance for Daughters (Numbers 27:1-11)
2. The objective of this lesson is not to argue that Ancient Near Eastern society and Jewish society were not prejudice against women. From the writings we have, the various societies of the Ancient Near East were certainly prejudice against women. The objective here is to evaluate how that prejudice comes out in the biblical text and how it is addressed by God. In observing the above examples, what do you see that suggests the cultures of the time were oppressive or prejudice against women?
3. What other texts come to mind that you could include in the above lists of examples?

4. Observe Leviticus 27:1-13. What stands out to you? How could this text be taken as devaluing women? What might be a possible reason for lower amounts placed on a female that would not include a lesser value of a woman as a person?
5. Observe Genesis 1:27-28. How do you understand these laws in light of that declaration of equality for male and female?
6. Observe Matthew 19:3-10. How does Jesus' comments about the law being given to minimize the hardness of heart help you to understand these various passages? Do you agree that some laws in Torah are not given to promote God's highest standard of holiness but rather as a low civil standard to mitigate the effects caused by the sin of people? If you do not agree with this view, what is your view? How do you understand the hardness of heart comment by Jesus?
7. At the bottom of page 7, there is a recommended list of things to consider when reading passages that seem to devalue women. Does that list seem helpful? What would you remove from the list or change or add?

Lesson 20: Numbers 11-14 Grumbling in the Wilderness (Wandering, part 1)

Introduction

Numbers: Kingdom Rebellion

Key Passage: 14:20-23

| 1:1-10:10 | 10:11-25:18 | 26-36 |
|--------------------------------|-------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| Preparation to enter the land | Wandering in the desert | Preparation to enter the land |
| Census of the first generation | Death of the first generation | Census of the second generation |

The book of Numbers divides nicely into three main divisions. In the first nine chapters we have a census of the first generation out of Egypt and laws dealing with entering the promise land. In the last 11 chapters we have a census of the second generation out of Egypt and more laws dealing with entering the promise land. In the middle 16 chapters, we have Israel wandering in the desert. That trip is marked by grumbling and death.

For our next three lessons, we will focus on this middle section of Numbers. We start with the grumbling in the wilderness, then in the next lesson I am going to consider the story of Moses being punished for striking a rock, and in the third lesson we will address the story of Balaam and the donkey.

Okay, so, in this lesson we consider the grumbling. I am going to give you the overall context of grumbling and then focus in on some specific examples.

Grumbling in the wilderness: a theme of the first generation

The author of the New Testament book of Hebrews wrote to first century Christian Jews experiencing pressure to walk away from Jesus and return back to the synagogue. In calling his audience to hold on to Jesus, he wrote this in Hebrews 3:14-19.

¹⁴ For we have become partakers of Christ, if we hold fast the beginning of our assurance firm until the end, ¹⁵ while it is said,

“TODAY IF YOU HEAR HIS VOICE, DO NOT HARDEN YOUR HEARTS, AS WHEN THEY PROVOKED ME.”

¹⁶ For who provoked Him when they had heard? Indeed, did not all those who came out of Egypt led by Moses? ¹⁷ And with whom was He angry for forty years? Was it not with those who sinned, whose bodies fell in the wilderness? ¹⁸ And to whom did He swear that they would not enter His rest, but to those who were disobedient? ¹⁹ So we see that they were not able to enter because of unbelief.

This is the legacy left by the first generation of Israelites to come out of Egypt. They were not the Great Generation. They became an illustration, a by-word for faithlessness, for unbelief. The words “Today if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts, as when they provoked me,” are not original to the author of Hebrews. He is quoting Psalm 95. Grumbling is how that 1st generation out of Egypt was remember 500 years later by the psalmists of David’s era, and then also 1000 years after that at the birth of the church. And I guess, since we are still talking about it that legacy of unbelief has lasted another 2000 years to reach us. They are the *The Grumbling Generation*, the complainers. That’s not a legacy to be proud of.

After the Israelites fail to enter the promise land, Moses recalls God saying,

²² Surely all the men who have seen My glory and My signs which I performed in Egypt and in the wilderness, yet have put Me to the test these ten times and have not listened to My voice, ²³ shall by no means see the land which I swore to their fathers, nor shall any of those who spurned Me see it (Numbers 14:22-23).

God says the people of Israel put him “to the test these ten times.” That makes you wonder, “What ten times?” The number ten might be just an expression to mean over and over again, so as a general

use of the number 10. But it might also mean 10 specific times that God has in mind. It's just not clear which ten times he is referring to. If we keep going to the end of Numbers and count up all the stories of complaint and grumbling, we get eight incidents, starting in 11:1 and ending in 21:5.

| Grumbling in the book of Numbers | | | | | |
|----------------------------------|---------------|---|--|---|---------------------------------------|
| No. | Ref. | Source | Complaint | Egypt comment | Punishment |
| G1 | 11:1 | People | - | | Burned |
| G2 | 11:4 | People | Who will give us meat to eat? | We remember the food of Egypt. | Plague |
| G3 | 12:2 | Aaron and Miriam | Has the Lord only spoken through Moses? | | Leprosy on Miriam |
| G4 | 14:2 | People | Why did God bring us here to die (at the hands of the Canaanites)? | Would that we had died in the land of Egypt. | Death of a generation |
| G5 | 16:2
16:13 | Korah, Dathan, Abiram, On and 250 leaders | Why do you exalt yourself Moses & Aaron? | You brought us up from a land flowing with milk and honey. | The earth swallowed and fire consumed |
| G6 | 16:41 | People | You caused the death of the Lord's people. | | Plague killed 14,700 |
| G7 | 20:2 | People | No water. | Why have you made us come up from Egypt to this wretched place? | |
| G8 | 21:5 | People | There is no food and no water and we loathe this miserable food. | Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? | Fiery serpents killed many |

We can also go back and include incidents from the book of Exodus. The journey from Egypt to Sinai in Exodus 14-17 foreshadows the journey in Numbers and includes its own four examples of grumbling. That gives us 12 incidents total.

| Grumbling in the book of Exodus | | | | | |
|---------------------------------|-------|--------|--|--|---|
| No. | Ref. | Source | Complaint | Egypt comment | No Punishment |
| G1 | 14:11 | People | We are going to die (at the hands of the Egyptians). | Doesn't Egypt have enough graves that you brought us out here to die? | Israel crosses the Red Sea; the army of Egypt drowns. |
| G2 | 15:24 | People | The water is bitter. | | Clean water |
| G3 | 16:2 | People | No food. | Would that we had died by the Lord's hand in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the pots of meat and ate bread to the full. | Manna and quail |
| G4 | 17:2 | People | No water. | | Water from a rock |

If we take out the two occasions of grumbling that were instigated just by other leaders, not by the people as a whole, but just some leaders, first Aaron and Miriam, then Korah and the 250 with him, that would reduce it down to 10 incidents of grumbling by the whole people of Israel. That does not quite fit with the text, because we would have to include a few incidents that happen after God said, "[they] have put me to the test these ten times." The chronology does not match up perfectly. But it is interesting. And, at least looking through all these incidences, we see that there is a lot of grumbling going on.

When we look back at the book of Exodus, at that journey from Egypt, so from after the Red Sea up to Sinai, that yields some interesting observations. The first complaint in Exodus 14:11 is at the Red Sea. "We are all going to die. Why did you bring us here!" And God hears the complaint, and he saves the Israelites, and he crushes the Egyptian army. The second complaint in Exodus 15:24 is about a

lack of drinking water. The water at that place is bitter. God provides fresh water. The third complaint in Exodus 16:2 is over the lack of food. God provides manna. He also explains his intention in requiring them only to gather enough manna for one day at a time, “that I might test them, whether or not they will walk in my instruction (16:4).” The text does not say the Israelites test God, but, the first time we get this idea, it is God testing the Israelites. The language gets flipped around in the fourth incident in Exodus 17:2 when the people complain again about a lack of water. And in this case, we are told, “They tested the LORD, saying, ‘Is the LORD among us or not (17:7)?’” Again, there is this testing language, and in this case, it is the same as in Numbers 14, “they put me to the test these ten times.” It is the Israelites testing God. It is the Israelites showing a lack of faith in God. They are testing his patience. They are testing his character.

God allows adversity in the lives of the Israelites to see if they will trust him; to see if they will continue to walk according to the commands he has given them. God saved Israel out of Egypt without any action on behalf of the Israelites. He brought Egypt to its knees solely through his own power, his own action. Now God has allowed adversity to come their way. And God allows things to get tough. God requires the Israelites to participate in the journey, to participate in the struggle. It is a classic picture of discipleship. Salvation is a free gift. We don’t do anything at the start. Often when a person comes to know the Lord for the first time, there is a joy and a peace that follows, that motivates obedience. Reading the Bible is exciting. Everything is new. Christian brothers and sisters are great. The leaders are so wise. It’s easy at the start because God is doing everything, and we have rose colored glasses or we have this excitement and joy to spur us on. But God allows the honeymoon to wear off. That is not all real. God is doing that for us.

There is a parallel to romantic relationships. Initial romantic love causes people to do crazy things, to stay up all night talking, to drive hours and hours to meet up, to sacrifice time and energy for each other. I remember talking with Brenda until two or three in the morning and then getting up and going to work or getting up and going to class. And you cannot live that way. You do not have the energy through life to live the way you live when you start dating. But in reality, it is not much of a sacrifice. The initial chemical excitement, often mistakenly translated as unconditional love, is a romantic euphoria that makes the sacrifice fun. It’s not really sacrifice. It’s a joy. The guy suddenly loves shopping and avocados. I danced and started watching chick-flicks. Whatever she loves, he loves. Once the guy gets the girl or once the girl gets the guy, that initial euphoria that made sacrifice so easy begins to fade away. Romantic love is great. It gets you started, but it cannot carry you through. It is like throwing gasoline on a fire. It flames up quickly, but it dies down quickly. If the wood does not catch and start to burn, the fire goes out. What you want in a relationship ultimately are these deep burning embers. At times it may not even look like there is a fire, but if you stir it around a bit, you see this deep, warm, intense glow burning within. That glow, that heat, indicates a deeper intimacy, care, respect, trust, and commitment. It is what you want in a marriage relationship. But it takes adversity. It takes commitment through the mundane to get to those deep glowing embers.

That deeper intimate commitment is also what you want in a relationship with God. You build it by walking through adversity with God and staying committed through the mundane, after the initial euphoria has worn off. So, many potential disciples of Christ flame out when the winds and rain come, and the weeds grow up. They have no root. They are choked out. It is all great at first. It is interesting to me how many people stop reading the Bible after those initial days of euphoria wear off because they do not get the joy and peace they got at first when they were reading the Bible. It is as though the only purpose of the Bible is a quick emotional fix, like eating cake and ice cream. You know, that is why I come to the Bible. And if I don’t feel great after I read it, then why would I read it. Really, there is no point in studying the Word of God, God’s perspective of reality unless it happens to give you a good feeling in the moment? So much value in life comes from doing challenging tasks that do not give an immediate emotional benefit. Studying the bible, attending a home group, prayer, going to church, maintaining integrity in relationships and in your choices of entertainment,

initiating spiritual conversation, addressing conflict, forgiving and asking for forgiveness, trusting God when life sucks. Doing it when the joy is high and doing it when the joy is absent. That's how disciples are made.

The journey to Sinai is a God-tailored discipleship course for beginners. The first generation out of Egypt fails to embrace that challenge. They see barriers as reason to complain and turn back. And they complain their way through the journey. And you wonder, "Are they getting anything out of this?" And they even start longing for slavery in Egypt. They have no vision for what could be. Moses sees a promise land. They only see what was, what we left. And they do not even see that correctly. How often do you hear people wish themselves backwards. And there is this imaginary past that was so great. "If only we could return to the communist days under Tito. Those were the days."

God does not punish the Israelite people at all during this initial journey described in Exodus. He gives them everything. He saves them at the Red Sea. He gives them water. He gives them food. He gives them more water. God has great patience with these young disciples. He keeps providing for them and keeps giving them opportunities to step up and trust. His name is "compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, full of lovingkindness and truth." But notice, it is "slow to anger", not "never angry." On the other side of Mount Sinai, after the golden calf and the restoration of covenant, after the indwelling of tabernacle, God's slowness in anger comes to an end with this unbelieving generation. To call them disciples is being way too generous. The majority are never going to yield in the stubbornness of their hearts. This is the sad legacy of The Grumbling Generation. Let's consider some specific incidents. And as we do, let's consider not only what we learn from the people but also the lessons of leadership that we see in Moses.

Chapter 11: The burden of a leader revealed the midst of grumbling.

The first complaint of Numbers comes in 11:1-3. This is also the first complaint followed by punishment. Fire from the LORD burns among the people. It is a literal demonstration of the language of Exodus where God's anger is said to burn. The appearance of his glory on the mountain was a consuming fire. He is the fire on the bush. This is not a people that has yielded in dependence to the him. They continue to turn in mass away from God. The potential result is not only a loss of the physical promise land, but also the loss of the eternal promise land. When sin continues to slowly lead a community of people further and further from God, both the most just thing and also the most loving thing might be a harsh punishment that can have the result of awakening at least some to their need for the Lord. This punishment does not have that effect on these people. They are a truly a stubborn people. After the fire, they quickly turn to complaint again. Let's read the second complaint. This is a bit longer. This is Numbers, we will start in 11:4-6.

⁴ The rabble who were among them had greedy desires; and also the sons of Israel wept again and said, "Who will give us meat to eat?" ⁵ We remember the fish which we used to eat free in Egypt [they were slaves, but they ate the fish for free], the cucumbers and the melons and the leeks and the onions and the garlic, ⁶ but now our appetite is gone. There is nothing at all to look at except this manna. [Which by the way they do get free from heaven, it just falls down and they pick it up.]"

The people show no vision for a future promise land and no appreciation for the miraculous provision God is giving them on the way there. They are not prepared to suffer even for a little while for the freedom that lies ahead. They begin to dream of the slavery they left behind. They have no sense of where they are going. They only see the dark clouds of the present day, and they don't even see that clearly. They have all they need in God's provision of manna. But they want more. Are we ever like that?

Moses sees clearly what they left behind, and he sees what lies ahead. But the complaining of the people weighs him down heavily. The people are pushing him over the edge. And he unloads his frustration on God in Numbers 11:10-15.

¹⁰ Now Moses heard the people weeping throughout their families, each man at the doorway of his tent; and the anger of the LORD was kindled greatly, and Moses was displeased. ¹¹ So Moses said to the LORD, “Why have You been so hard on Your servant? And why have I not found favor in Your sight, that You have laid the burden of all this people on me? ¹² Was it I who conceived all this people? Was it I who brought them forth, that You should say to me, ‘Carry them in your bosom as a nurse carries a nursing infant, to the land which You swore to their fathers’? ¹³ Where am I to get meat to give to all this people? For they weep before me, saying, ‘Give us meat that we may eat!’ ¹⁴ I alone am not able to carry all this people, because it is too burdensome for me. ¹⁵ So if You are going to deal thus with me, please kill me at once, if I have found favor in Your sight, and do not let me see my wretchedness.”

“Just kill me now!” that is what Moses is saying. And what leader can’t relate in some way to the emotion spilling out of Moses. Moses, honest with the emotional burden, blames God. “Why did you make me do this? These are your people. You thought them up. You are the one who promised the promise land to their fathers. Why did you call me to this role? Why did you give me this unfaithful, unbelieving, ungrateful rabble? I can’t do it. I can’t take it anymore. They want meat. Where am I going to get them meat? What am I going to do? Kill every last sheep that we have? Where am I going to get meat?” This is so easy for me because I have done this so often in my ministry. And unfortunately, Brenda, not the Lord, is the one who has had to listen to it. You get pushed over the edge and emotionally you just can’t take it anymore. And you just spill it all out on God. And I have also been there when other leaders have done it. And I have had to go around and say, “Don’t worry, don’t worry. He will calm down. Just give him a moment.”

So, how is God going to respond to Moses. Remember, one of the principles of biblical interpretation I mentioned way back in Genesis when we were talking about Abraham is that even though biblical narrative rarely tells us directly the state of a person’s heart, we interpret the state of the heart according to the dialogue they have with God. How does God respond to the person? What happens in the person’s life following this? God’s patience with the Israelites during the Exodus journey could have left us wondering about their spiritual state. They were complaining, but God is not punishing them. Were they simply young, immature believers? Are they going to grow out of the grumbling? Or was this early complaining evidence of stubborn hearts that would just refuse to give in. If we have any doubts, we are now be justified in recognizing, “No, this is not maturing believers. These are stubbornly, unrepentant people.

But even while we more and more lose faith in the people as they continue to complain, we also observe growth in Moses. He was rash and overconfident way back in the beginning of Exodus, when he killed the Egyptian taskmaster at the beginning of the story while he was still in Pharaoh’s household. He became humble in the wilderness with the Midianites, so much so, that he developed a sense of inferiority. And when God called him to go tell Pharaoh to let the Israelites go, there was no ounce of idealistic passion in him at all to motivate him. He knew he could not do what God was asking, and he kept telling God. But he went in the end. And from that point until now, we have seen the confidence of Moses grow as a leader, but it has grown along with a humble dependence on God. The Moses here who is unloading his emotional burden on God is a faithful servant-leader. Listening to God’s response to Moses is going to give us insight both into how God views the heart of Moses and how God views the hearts of the people.

¹⁶ The LORD therefore said to Moses, “Gather for Me seventy men from the elders of Israel, whom you know to be the elders of the people and their officers and bring them to the tent of meeting, and let them take their stand there with you. ¹⁷ Then I will come down and speak with you there, and I will take of the Spirit who is upon you, and will put Him upon them; and they shall bear the burden of the people with you, so that you will not bear it all alone. ¹⁸ Say to the people, ‘Consecrate yourselves for tomorrow, and you shall eat meat; for you have wept in the ears of the LORD, saying, “Oh that someone would give us meat to eat! For we were well-off in Egypt.” Therefore the LORD will give you meat and you shall eat. ¹⁹ ‘You shall eat, not one

day, nor two days, nor five days, nor ten days, nor twenty days,²⁰ but a whole month, until it comes out of your nostrils and becomes loathsome to you; because you have rejected the LORD who is among you and have wept before Him, saying, “Why did we ever leave Egypt?””

We see God’s response both to Moses and to the people. To Moses God doesn’t even say anything about his emotional unburdening. This is God remaining completely calm. He is not taking it as sin, as stubbornness, as rebellion on the case of Moses. He realizes that Moses is emotionally overwhelmed. And he actually just goes ahead and gives Moses a solution. He is saying, “You are right. You are overburdened. And what I am going to do is I am going to take 70 men of Israel, and they are going to share the burden back with you.

And when we read what Moses then says back to God, we still hear some of his dismay. God has responded back to the emotional statement with a solution. And Moses is still kind of worked up a bit.

²¹ But Moses said, “The people, among whom I am, are 600,000 on foot; yet You have said, ‘I will give them meat, so that they may eat for a whole month.’” ²² Should flocks and herds be slaughtered for them, to be sufficient for them? Or should all the fish of the sea be gathered together for them, to be sufficient for them?” ²³ The LORD said to Moses, “Is the LORD’s power limited? Now you shall see whether My word will come true for you or not.”

And that is not again a strong rebuke on Moses for questioning the Lord. It sounds to me like a slight rebuke, but it is a reminder to Moses who he is talking to. And if God says he is going to give meat for a month, then he is going to give meat for a month. And Moses receives that, and he goes on with the command of the Lord. He goes ahead and tells the people what God said, and he gathers together 70 elders.

²⁵ Then the LORD came down in the cloud and spoke to him; and He took of the Spirit who was upon him and placed Him upon the seventy elders. And when the Spirit rested upon them, they prophesied. But they did not do it again. ²⁶ But two men had remained in the camp; the name of one was Eldad and the name of the other Medad. And the Spirit rested upon them (now they were among those who had been registered, but had not gone out to the tent), and they prophesied in the camp. ²⁷ So a young man ran and told Moses and said, “Eldad and Medad are prophesying in the camp.” ²⁸ Then Joshua the son of Nun, the attendant of Moses from his youth, said, “Moses, my lord, restrain them.”

I love the loyalty of Joshua here. I think he is concerned for the honor and authority of Moses who he faithfully serves. He is nervous about these two men in the camp who did not come out to the tent like they were supposed to. We do not know why not. But he is worried they are infringing on Moses’ role as the prophet and the leader of Israel. “But Moses said to him,” this is verses 29 and 30,

²⁹ But Moses said to him, “Are you jealous for my sake? Would that all the LORD’s people were prophets, that the LORD would put His Spirit upon them!” ³⁰ Then Moses returned to the camp, both he and the elders of Israel.

Moses came to God with a burden. He was emotionally overwhelmed. God answered Moses’ need with wise guidance and with spiritual provision. He tells Moses that he needs help. He then validates the spiritual ministry of the helpers through a one-time gift of prophecy.

God has been patient with Israel, but their hearts are far from him. This is how he answers their complaint, Numbers 11:31-33,

³¹ Now there went forth a wind from the LORD and it brought quail from the sea, and let them fall beside the camp, about a day’s journey on this side and a day’s journey on the other side, all around the camp and about two cubits deep on the surface of the ground. ³² The people spent all day and all night and all the next day, and gathered the quail (he who gathered least gathered ten homers) and they spread them out for themselves all around the camp. ³³ While

the meat was still between their teeth, before it was chewed, the anger of the LORD was kindled against the people, and the LORD struck the people with a very severe plague.

Patient love has not worked. God has turned to justice, which is also a form of tough love. There is hope for restoration if the people can be shaken awake by the plague. If they connect this plague to the plagues on Egypt, they might just come to see how wicked they have been, and they just might just turn in repentance to the Lord.

Four lessons of leadership highlighted in the midst of grumbling.

I see four lessons of leadership in the narrative.

First, **criticism comes with the role.** Leaders have to hold on to a vision of the future and leaders have to make difficult strategic decisions to help a community realize that vision. A wise person told me early on, “Even though you serve people in ministry, you are ultimately not serving them. You serve God. You seek his pleasure, not theirs.” We can imagine how Moses felt, having led this people out of Egypt and knowing he is leading them to a good place, and knowing he gave up his life in Midian to do this, and yet, they have continually resisted and complained.

Even harder for Moses, the grumbling of the next chapter involves his sister Miriam and brother Aaron. They speak out about his wife. The verb to “speak against” in 12:1 is in the feminine form, suggesting that Miriam is the instigator, which might also explain why she is the one who gets punished, not Aaron. The criticism is against Moses’ wife. She is referred to as a Cushite. We would think that refers to a woman from Cush, which is below Egypt, so is not Zipporah. But scholars argue that the term could apply to a Midianite for various reasons. Whether it is Zipporah or not, the criticism likely has to do with the command Moses gave to the Israelites not to marry foreign wives when they enter the promise land. The reasoning is that marriage to pagan women will lead Israelite men from the worship of Yahweh. And this is another one of those cases where the details of the law still need to be worked out. We might ask, “What about foreign women who are already married before the command is given?” Or, “What about foreigners who join the community, foreigners are allowed by mosaic law to join Israel, to put themselves under the reign of God, and live under the covenant law of Moses. Ruth, the Moabitess, is an example of a foreign woman who lived out faith in Yahweh and was accepted as the bride of Boaz. So, even though there is a valid question about Moses’ wife, it is a question that has an appropriate answer in the law, especially when we consider how Zipporah circumcised their son, joining herself to the God of Israel.

But the criticism is not really about Moses’ wife, is it? And this is often the nature of criticism. The top-level issue being voiced might be real, it might be a criticism, but it is often an emotional expression or attack being made because of a more fundamental, sometimes unspoken issue. In this case the underlying issue is not left unspoken. Miriam the prophetess and Aaron the priest ask rhetorically, “Has the Lord indeed spoken only through Moses? Has he not spoken through us as well?” And they think the answer is, “Yes, God has spoken through us.” So, we think, look at that issue, “What does that have to do with Moses’ wife?” Well, nothing. The complaint has to do about the credibility of Moses. They are complaining about something very different than their real hearts’ desire, which is a desire to have more influence over Israel. Miriam and Aaron want the same level of authority as Moses who holds a unique position of covenant mediator.

This brings us to a second principle of leadership. **Leader’s must allow God to vindicate them.** We are told at this point in the text that “Moses was very humble, more than any man who was on the face of the earth.” I can immediately think of a long list of things Moses could say to Miriam and Aaron. I know that’s how I would respond. I do not take criticism well. I am quick to become defensive and quick to state my case, too quick. With this comment about the humility of Moses right here in the narrative, I think we are supposed to notice that Moses does not say one word. And that is being connected to his humility. Moses does not respond to the criticism. He doesn’t defend himself. Moses puts himself in the hands of God. There are times when a leader just needs to stay completely silent. There are other times when a leader needs to appropriately state his case before

the appropriate authorities, before other leaders in the community. In either case, whether it is staying silent or appropriately voicing a case, vindication comes from God. Leaders have to trust God to vindicate them. We serve at his pleasure. If God truly gave the call, if you really believe God called you to a role of leadership, then you trust God to keep you in that position of leadership. It is not yours to grasp. If the criticism is outside the community by someone who has no hand in the solution, no relationship to the people involved, I think we let it go. We don't even respond. We just focus on what God has called us to do. We ignore it as we continue to pursue the vision God has given us. If the criticism is in the community or comes by a partner or a friend of the community, we must be slow to speak, slow to become angry, and address the situation through the right system of authority. In this case, there is no right system of authority because these are the top three leaders in Israel. There really is no one to talk to. Moses leaves it in the hands of God. God vindicates Moses.

First was the lesson that criticism comes with the role. You cannot lead without being criticized. Second, when criticized trust God to vindicate you. But your honor in his hands. Third, **because delegation is necessary, leaders must learn to share power and authority.** This is the primary leadership lesson I see from our story in chapter 11. It is really two lessons together. The first is, delegation is a must. The burden was too much for Moses. Moses had already received similar advice to share the load back in Exodus 18. Apparently, it is a tough one for him, and he is still growing in this principle of delegation. He does have a special unique role, he cannot share. He is the one who gets to direct revelation from God, only him, not Aaron, not Miriam. But there is a lot that he is doing that he could share. And this is so typical of so many leaders that they take so much burden on them, just because they know how to do things well, and they see the vision, they think they have to do it. And they have to learn to delegate. Not only because they need to pass off responsibility, but other people do not grow if they do not have the chance to step in and serve and sacrifice and lead.

But to truly delegate, and here is the second lesson, leaders have to give away power. They have to give away real responsibility and authority. God says, "Spread it out." To do that, Moses is going to have to share power. Younger leaders did not have real authority to act, whether they succeed or whether they fail. And if they fail, they do not need to be beaten down by older leaders. And Moses seems to get this. He does not have to control everything. Joshua is really concerned by what is happening out of sight without Moses present, these two guys in the camp. So, when the young man runs to Moses, Joshua is quick to criticize these two leaders who are prophesying in the camp. But Moses says, "Let it happen. Let the Spirit work." It is a mark of Moses' humility that he is able to let go of control, and he is able to let others exercise their spiritual gifts in the community without his oversight.

Fourth lesson, **God's people need leaders.** Leadership involves a vision of where the people need to go and the heart and the will to help them get there. These people desperately need Moses, and they need other leaders working with Moses, or they are going to lose Moses. He can't do it alone. All God's people have the ability to sit back and criticize. That is not a unique spiritual gift. Not a lot of people are able or available or willing to step up and lead others forward. It is not an easy job. And unless we are in the game, contributing, serving, praying for our leaders, helping our leaders, we really should keep our criticism to ourselves. We need leaders. And we need to pray for them. And we need to encourage them. And we need to help them. Let's look at one more incident of grumbling. And it is a big one.

Chapter 14: The heart of a leader revealed in grumbling.

In chapter 13 of Numbers men from each tribe are sent to spy out the land. Chapter 14 does not begin well. This is verses 1-4.

¹ Then all the congregation lifted up their voices and cried, and the people wept that night. ² All the sons of Israel grumbled against Moses and Aaron; and the whole congregation said to them, "Would that we had died in the land of Egypt! Or would that we had died in this wilderness! ³ Why is the LORD bringing us into this land, to fall by the sword? Our wives and our

little ones will become plunder; would it not be better for us to return to Egypt?" ⁴ So they said to one another, "Let us appoint a leader and return to Egypt."

Joshua and Caleb speak up in faith to support the original vision of taking the land. "We can do it!" The people pick up stones to kill them. God intervenes manifesting his glory to all Israel. Then God expresses his desire to Moses to destroy Israel and start over with Moses. In a way very similar to the golden calf incident, God's revealing his just anger draws out a response from Moses. And here is that response. This is Numbers 14:12-19.

¹³ But Moses said to the LORD, "Then the Egyptians will hear of it, for by Your strength You brought up this people from their midst, ¹⁴ and they will tell it to the inhabitants of this land. They have heard that You, O LORD, are in the midst of this people, for You, O LORD, are seen eye to eye, while Your cloud stands over them; and You go before them in a pillar of cloud by day and in a pillar of fire by night. ¹⁵ Now if You slay this people as one man, then the nations who have heard of Your fame will say, ¹⁶ 'Because the LORD could not bring this people into the land which He promised them by oath, therefore He slaughtered them in the wilderness.' ¹⁷ But now, I pray, let the power of the Lord be great, just as You have declared, ¹⁸ 'The LORD is slow to anger and abundant in lovingkindness, forgiving iniquity and transgression; but He will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and the fourth generations.' ¹⁹ Pardon, I pray, the iniquity of this people according to the greatness of Your lovingkindness, just as You also have forgiven this people, from Egypt even until now."

This is the prayer of a leader. This is a guy who gets the glory of God. And be careful here. Moses' is not playing up to the vanity of God. Moses is not trying to manipulate God by bringing up his glory. "God, you care so much about your glory. Don't destroy the people." No, Moses cares about God's glory. Moses cares about the fame of his name. That burns in Moses' heart. That's the heart of a leader. He cares first and foremost about the glory of God. He loves the Lord God with all his heart, with all his mind, with all his soul, with all his strength. Moses second concern is the life of the people. He also loves the people. The sinful, rebellious people. Did you notice how Moses connected the two by calling on the name of God. When God agreed after the golden calf incident to dwell among the people, Moses asked to see his glory. "How can you, a holy God, dwell among a sinful people without killing them? How can holy fire rest on a flammable bush without burning it up?" The request to see God's glory is a request to see his true character, to see his being. "Who are you?" And God reveals his glory, his character, by proclaiming his name. Moses here quotes that name back to God. It is here in verse 18. Did you hear it? "The LORD is slow to anger and abundant in lovingkindness, forgiving iniquity and transgression; but he will by no means clear the guilty." On that basis, the basis of his character, Moses pleads, "Pardon their iniquity even as you have done from Egypt up to this day." This is the way to pray to God. The concern is for God's glory and for compassion on the people. And the basis for that compassion is not the goodness of the people, but the character of God expressed in his name. Moses is saying, "Please God, based on who you are, show your glory through compassion."

For Moses it is a sacrificial plea. The people are going to be forgiven the penalty of their sin. They are not going to be destroyed. But they are still going to have to live with the consequence of their sin. That is part of the name Moses quoted, "But he will by no means clear the guilty."

²⁰ So the LORD said, "I have pardoned *them* according to your word; ²¹ but indeed, as I live, all the earth will be filled with the glory of the LORD. ²² Surely all the men who have seen My glory and My signs which I performed in Egypt and in the wilderness, yet have put Me to the test these ten times and have not listened to My voice, ²³ shall by no means see the land which I swore to their fathers, nor shall any of those who spurned Me see it."

We do not know the individual state of each Israelite heart. Taken as a whole, this generation proved a faithless generation from the sin of the golden calf to the end of the 40 years in the wilderness. They continue throughout to grumble and complain. I imagine there was a remnant of true believers

like Moses, Joshua, Caleb. But they don't stand up with Moses, Joshua, and Caleb. They don't speak out. If they believed, they will enter into the eternal promise land. But while on earth, they must find peace with God, accepting the consequences of their own sin and the sin of their generation. Now this is a reality for us as well. Grace does not mean that God will always erase the effects of our sin. Sometimes he does. Sometimes he does not. Sometimes he requires that we walk through a dark road of our own making before we enter into the rest of eternity. This generation has to walk that dark road of their own making. We do not know how many may have entered into true rest in the end.

Unfortunately, it's not going to get better in our next lesson. More rebellion follows. Even Moses will experience the discipline of the Lord. We will pick the story up again next time in Numbers 15-20.

Reflection Questions

1. When you scan back over the grumbling that occurred on the journey from Egypt to Sinai in Exodus 15:22-17:7, what stands out to you? (You may want to also look at the chart on page 2.)
2. What stands out to you as interesting, important, strange or confusing when you read about the grumbling in Numbers 11?
3. What do you observe about God in his responses to the people and to Moses?
4. In the four lessons of leadership provide above on (pages 7-8) which one speaks most to your own experience?
5. What stands out to you in Moses' prayer in Numbers 14:11-19?
6. How does the prayer reveal the ongoing change in Moses as a leader who is walking with God? (Think all the way back to the burning bush in Exodus 3-4.)
7. What aspects of Moses' prayer could serve you as a model when you pray? What seems helpful to you?

Lesson 21: Numbers 15-21 Moses Strikes the Rock (Wandering, part 2)

Introduction

Numbers: Kingdom Rebellion

Key Passage: 14:20-23

| 1:1-10:10 | 10:11-25:18 | 26-36 |
|--------------------------------|-------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| Preparation to enter the land | Wandering in the desert | Preparation to enter the land |
| Census of the first generation | Death of the first generation | Census of the second generation |

The stories of grumbling in the middle section of the book of Numbers continue on after the refusal to enter the promise land. Four incidents led up to the failure to enter and four more will follow. We can put together a little bit of a timeline, though not an exact one. Back in chapter 10, verse 11, the Israelites set out from Sinai during the second month of the second year. They had been at Sinai for about a year. The tabernacle is built. They just celebrated Passover in the first month. Now in the second month the cloud of God's glory lifts from the tabernacle, and they set out.

10:33 reports that the expected time of travel is 3 days; 3 days! The chapter starts with the nation setting out in obedience and ends with a bit of enthusiastic poetry from the leader Moses spurring the people on:

Rise up, O LORD!
And let Your enemies be scattered,
And let those who hate You flee before You (10:35).

That enthusiasm of Moses does not hold the people for long at all. Three days is a long weekend. That's how long it should take from Sinai to the promise land. That makes the grumbling of chapter 11 all the more poignant. The people could not hold on to their faith for three days. Romans 5:3-4 gives us this spiritual principle: "we exult in our tribulations, knowing that tribulation brings about perseverance; and perseverance, proven character; and proven character, hope." The journey was not meant to be a great test. The people did not have the best food, but you don't have the best food on military maneuvers or on a camping trip? And they did have food. They didn't even have to carry the food. The manna came to them.

Every June our Adventure Education staff guy Nate takes Leadership Lab International students on a three-day trip to build the team. We have always eaten well, thanks to Nate's wife Mia who is an expert in packing light and tasty. Nate has taken LLI team members hiking, canoeing, this year they kayaked around an island. On the first canoe trip Johann from the Philippines talked us into eating grasshoppers that we roasted over an open fire. I ate mine and offered one to Johann. He said, "No, no, no...I have eaten grasshopper. But I don't like grasshopper." The students always enjoy the weekend with Nate. It's an adventure.

It is amazing how hope can change a situation. And most of that rested on Nate for us. We trusted our leader to take us from start to finish with adequate food and water and sleep in between. It was not great food. Sometimes the water tasted like purification tablets. The sleep is never very good. But our mindset is on adventure. And have a sure hope that everything is going to turn out alright. I do not think my character has grown a lot from joining the trips because Nate has everything under complete control. I just have to go along.

I wish I could have that same trust in God no matter what adventure life brings. When the tribulations come, if I trust God to bring me through, that gives me strength to persevere, and if I persevere, then my character is proven trustworthy, and if I experience God bringing me through and working in my character, then my hope grows. That is the underlying principle here. A confident hope that brings us through tribulation results in a more confident hope. But I think, "How often do I

bail out at the last moment? I think I am at a breaking point, so I give up, or I lash out and if I had just held on a few more hours or another day or two, I would have made it to the end of the trial.

This generation out of Israel does not trust Moses, their leader, and they do not trust God. They had learning moments like this before. And they have been carried through before. We read about those in Exodus 16 and 17 as the people journeyed to Mount Sinai. They did not learn from those moments. They did not exult in their tribulations. They did not persevere without complaint. They did not experience the proving of their own character. And they did not grow strong in hope; in their vision of a future promise land. This generation is a mirror for us to look into. Do I trust God through the tough spots in life? Do I bail out or do I persevere? Do I live this life with a strong conviction of the hope that lies before me, of eternal relationship with my heavenly father? Is this life a death march into the desert? Or an adventure wilderness trip ending up at home? How do I view it?

After three days the congregation of Israel complained, were punished, complained some more; that was all in chapter 11. They arrived at the southern border of the promise land. And they heard the report and saw the fruit brought back by the spies; grapes and pomegranates and figs. Yet, in their fear of the land's inhabitants, they did not trust Moses, and they did not trust God. They grumbled and complained and refused to go in. And then when the punishment of 40 years was laid on them, then they decided they would go in with or without God. This is a stubborn-hearted people. And we are not seeing any growth.

Faced with the wilderness they grumble against Moses and Aaron. Instead of receiving the discipline of God as a restorative rebuke and turning their hearts back to walk with him, they interpret the negative consequences as having nothing to do with their own behavior. They are not the problem. Moses' faulty vision was a mirage. There is no promise land for Israel. They never should have left Egypt. That was never God's plan. It could never have worked. Moses is the problem. That's the way they began to feel on the way to the promise land and that is the way they really feel after failing to get in.

The first four incidents of grumbling in chapters 10 through 14 only took a couple of months. The next four in chapters 15-21 are going to take a period of 40 years. The text seems to give us two examples at the beginning of those 40 years and then two at the end of the 40 years, though it is a little hard to figure out the timing, which is not clearly stated. But if these events mark the beginning and end, you have to wonder what it was like for Moses and the other faithful ones throughout the whole four decades. Maybe those times of transition brought to fore the worst of the Grumbling Generation. But you have to wonder what it was like throughout. We are going to consider the four incidents of grumbling that are recorded for this 40 year period with a special focus on the one where Moses strikes the rock.

Korah's Rebellion (16:1-40)

We start in chapter 16 with Korah's rebellion. The Levite Korah leads the rebellion with three men from the tribe of Reuben. Reuben was the first born of Jacob but was disqualified from that blessing after he slept with his father's concubine Bilhah. The blessing eventually lands on Judah and Joseph's son Manasseh. Those two are kind of vying for the spot. Moses is from neither of those tribes. He doesn't have a claim of Manasseh. He doesn't have a claim of Judah. He doesn't have a claim of Reuben. He has no inherited claim to lead Israel at all. His claim comes from a specific call by God.

Korah's claim comes as a cousin to Moses and Aaron. Their fathers are brothers from the clan of Kohath, Levi's second son. The priesthood was not bestowed on all the Levites, only on Aaron and his descendants. The rest of the Levites were to serve the priests in the work of the tabernacle. The clan of Kohath had the high honor of transporting the holy furnishings inside the tabernacle, like the lampstand and the ark of the covenant. They did not, however, participate in making sacrifice or burning incense in the tabernacle. That was reserved only for Aaron and for his sons.

Korah has a message for the people, though, and a message for Moses and Aaron. His message is not entirely false. He mixes truth with error. Let's hear it from Numbers 16:3.

They assembled together against Moses and Aaron, and said to them, "You have gone far enough, for all the congregation are holy, every one of them, and the LORD is in their midst; so why do you exalt yourselves above the assembly of the LORD?"

The first part of Kohath's speech is true. At Mount Sinai God called Israel "a kingdom of priests and a holy nation (Exodus 19:6)." They are all holy. God is in their midst. True. Rebellion does not recruit followers if the message is 100% false. Satan works by mixing truth and lie. The second part is the lie. "You exalt yourselves above the assembly of the LORD." Is that charge true? Moses and Aaron do claim special roles of leadership over Israel. The question is, "Who put them there?" The answer is God exalted them over the assembly of the LORD. God gave them that role.

Moses does not fight for himself. He relies on God who sets up a power encounter. We see this occasionally in the Bible, as with Elijah and the priests of Baal and fire comes down and burns up one and not the other. God does not normally validate his leaders with such a clear and severe manner. But these are critical times for the people of Israel. So, Moses tells Korah to bring 250 of his men with censers for burning incense to the tabernacle. The censers are interesting. Why did God command they bring censers? Well, Korah is claiming the right for himself and others to participate in the priestly rituals. Moses has said that right only belongs to Aaron and his descendants. And Moses has frightened people away by saying that if anybody else enters the tabernacle they will die. So, now Moses is giving Korah opportunity to prove his view of things. If he truly believes that he and others have right to perform the priestly ritual of Yahweh, come and do it.

Now, if you believe in God, and if you believe Moses and Aaron have been called by God, would you accept the challenge to come with your censer and burn incense at the tabernacle? No. You'd be a fool to accept, especially with the near memory of Aaron's sons modifying the ritual of burning incense and being burnt up themselves by the consuming anger of God. You wouldn't come. So, Korah must not accept Moses' interpretation of that event. He doesn't believe what he has been told by Moses. He doesn't believe that God has only appointed Moses. He is ready to challenge Moses' with his version, his interpretation of what has been happening. So, he comes with his 250 ready to test the LORD.

The Reubenite leaders are more suspicious. They refuse to come out of the camp to the tabernacle. So, in their response to Moses in Numbers 16:12-14, you hear both their complaint and their distrust of Moses.

¹² Then Moses sent a summons to Dathan and Abiram, the sons of Eliab; but they said, "We will not come up. ¹³ Is it not enough that you have brought us up out of a land flowing with milk and honey to have us die in the wilderness, but you would also lord it over us? ¹⁴ Indeed, you have not brought us into a land flowing with milk and honey, nor have you given us an inheritance of fields and vineyards. Would you put out the eyes of these men? We will not come up!"

They have turned the vision of a promise land upside down. In their discontent, they claim that Egypt was the land of milk and honey, re-interpreting their enslavement and the harsh labor. They also blame Moses for failing to attain the vision of the promise land, without taking any responsibility for their own part, their tribe's refusal to go into the land. And they accuse Moses of treachery, claiming that he plans to harm them, to put out their eyes, if they come up to the tabernacle. They believe it is all a big trap, so they stay down in the camp. And since the people are arranged by tribe, their choice to stay in the camp means they are surrounded by their own families and related clans.

This is another one of those stories in narrative biblical literature that the dialogue and the details all matter. It all connects. I will leave you to study the text more closely yourself. I am just giving you the overview of the story. Moses and Aaron do not rally the Levites to take up the sword against the

rebels the Reubenites feared. They live it to God. God chooses to mete out punishment himself. The 250 who burned incense are burned. They are consumed by the fire of God. While those who refused to come up to the tabernacle, think they are safely surrounded by their own people, they are swallowed up by the earth.

And the rest of the people are duly terrified, and they run away from the place of judgement. And God then instructs Aaron to take the fallen censers and hammer them into a plating for the tabernacle altar. 16:40 tells us this is to be a reminder to Israel, “that no layman who is not of the descendants of Aaron should come near to burn incense before the LORD.” Moses and Aaron did not exalt themselves. God exalted them. It is God’s plan for only Aaron and his descendants to serve as priests. That is not up for discussion.

Grumbling of the People (16:41-17:13)

The next incident of grumbling is an extension of this rebellion. Numbers 16:41 tells us,

“But on the next day all the congregation of the sons of Israel grumbled against Moses and Aaron, saying, ‘You are the ones who have caused the death of the LORD’s people.’”

We are sitting here reading the Bible, and we get to read an inspired interpretation of all these events. The people of Israel have to interpret the events with eyes of faith. They have to choose who to trust based on their past experiences, present circumstances, and future hopes. But the story of this generation shows a real inability to correctly interpret God’s actions in the past and a short-sightedness that cannot see God’s promises for the future. It is a very, very human reality. The difficulty of putting past, present, and future into the context of God’s story is true for every human generation. When human nature is the compass that is guiding our interpretation of events, we just don’t understand what God has done, what he is doing, what he will do. And the people of Israel are like this, and they persisted in reinterpreting life in Egypt while blaming Moses for not taking them to a better place. They do not own their own failure to trust God, and their failure to walk in faith. They have to find someone else to blame.

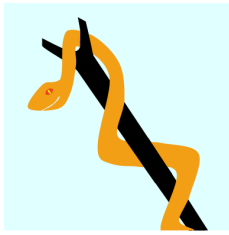
16:42 tells us that the cloud of the Lord then covered the tabernacle. This must have been a physical manifestation of the glory of the Lord that was not typical. Something noticeable was happening that the people could interpret as a response from God. It is the same language of the appearance of God’s glory from chapter 14 which stopped the people from stoning Moses and Aaron and Caleb and Joshua. So, now in this chapter 16, as God’s glory appears, a plague goes forth among the people. And then Aaron makes atonement for Israel and that stops the plague. And then God instructs the congregation, “We are going to have another test to prove that Aaron is indeed the head of the priesthood. And what follows is the story of the budding of Aaron’s staff as confirmation that he and his descendants are truly set apart by God for the priesthood. And again, I will leave the details of that story for you to observe yourself.

These two rebellions highlight the contentiousness of the people and how that contentiousness targets the leadership of Israel. The leaders are always the target. Moses and Aaron are the targets. So, they are claiming belief in God. It is not God who is the problem. It is Moses and Aaron who are the problem. Time and again they fail to persevere through tribulation with proven character. They had to find somebody else to blame. They have been given opportunity after opportunity to trust God and see him come through for them and grow in the hope of his good promises. But they fail to trust. They do not trust Moses, and they do not trust God. And failing to trust, they never grow in hope. This Grumbling Generation is a hopeless generation. We see that there is no hope in the final words of the narrative, which comes in Numbers 17:12-13.

¹² Then the sons of Israel spoke to Moses, saying, “Behold, we perish, we are dying, we are all dying! ¹³ Everyone who comes near, who comes near to the tabernacle of the LORD, must die. Are we to perish completely?”

There is no understanding of God. There is not trust. There is no hope.

Snake on a Pole (21:6-20)



The narrative then picks up again in chapter 20 with the third incident of grumbling. I am going to skip ahead to chapter 21 to our fourth and final incident, so that I can then come back to the third incident of Moses striking the rock. The last moment of complaint shows, as a whole, no change in the Grumbling Generation. It is the same refrain from 40 years before when they could not persevere for 3 days. This is Numbers 21:5.

The people spoke against God and Moses, “Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water, and we loathe this miserable food.”

After this, there is no dialogue with Moses, no verbal rebuke. I guess there comes a time when words exhaust even God. He just sends in snakes. The text calls them fiery serpents. Its not clear whether fiery refers to a burning sensation caused by the venom or whether the adjective describes a certain kind of viper. Either way, it fits with the theme of God’s burning anger against this continually stubborn people.

In an odd move, God instructs Moses to design a bronze serpent and put it on a pole to give the Israelites a means of expressing faith. It reminds me of baptism. The ritual of baptism does not confer grace or work some kind of magic transformation that changes a person, making them acceptable to God. But baptism does provide a person with a way of expressing faith in Jesus Christ. And faith in Jesus Christ does change a person. Baptism also symbolically mirrors and actual spiritual reality, the union of Christ.

God explains the purpose of the bronze serpent in 21:8, “Make a fiery *serpent*, and set it on a standard; and it shall come about, that everyone who is bitten, when he looks at it, he will live.” The physical object provided a means by which Israelites could express faith in the word of God. They were told to look at the bronze serpent, and they would live. To receive the blessing, they have to believe those instructions and look. It is not some magical power that comes from the snake that heals them. The looking is an act of faith. And then God heals them. We are not told how much God took into account the extent of faith being expressed by the Israelites when they looked. Did God require an expression of repentance, an acceptance that they indeed deserve the punishment they had received? We are not told that. We are just told that if they look in faith, they will be healed.

This story is our fourth monument of grace in the books of Moses, our monument from Numbers. Jesus compares himself to this bronze serpent in his conversation with Nicodemus in John 3:14, saying, “¹⁴ As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up; ¹⁵ so that whoever believes will in Him have eternal life.” Jesus is speaking of himself being lifted up on the cross. He uses this obscure reference while speaking to a teacher of the Law who would have known the story and the context. Jesus knew Nicodemus would get the reference.

We can immediately see an abstract similarity between the snake being lifted on the pole and Jesus being lifted up on a cross since both require faith and both result in salvation. But we need to think carefully to come up with the exact parallel. Are we saying Jesus is the snake? Are we saying a snake is the savior? When you look at a cross and see Jesus there, how does that compare to looking at the pole and seeing the snake? What is the snake? The snake is the curse. The snake is a just punishment for the sin committed by individual people and expressed together by a whole rebellious community. It is not the whole community that sins apart from individuals. Individuals sin. And they might do it as a group. Now, when you look at the cross, what is the curse? Is the curse Jesus? No, not exactly. The curse is the death of man. The wages of sin is death. We have, each one of us, sinned in our rebellious hearts against the holy God of all creation. And we stand condemned as a whole community of humanity. Because each of us as individuals have sinned. When we see the dead man on the cross, we see the judgment we deserve. The snake represents the curse. When they saw the snake on the pole, they saw the curse they deserved, and they trusted God to save them from the

curse. When we see Jesus on the cross, we see the curse we deserve. It should be me on the cross. But with the cross, we see even more. We see what they didn't see with the snake. We see the means of our salvation. Jesus took my place. He took the curse, the death of man, and so, while seeing the curse, I also see my Savior. He took my place. He took our place.

The Torah continues to remind us that the first question of covenant, "What makes me acceptable to be in relationship with God?", is answered, "A gift of grace received through faith." In Genesis, Abraham did not walk through the covenant sacrifice. God did. In Exodus, the Israelite's firstborn did not die. The blood of the lamb covered them. In Leviticus, the Day of Atonement employs two goats; one to show that blood covers the law, taking the sinner's penalty, and the second shows that God has removed the penalty of sin far from his people. He has taken it out of the camp. Here in Numbers we encounter another monument of grace in the law of Moses. Despite all the people had done through 40 long years of murmuring and complaining, God still provides the way of escape from the just penalty of sin. Look at the curse, up on the pole, and trust God to take the penalty from you. Let's read a little further of what Jesus said to Nicodemus,

¹⁴ As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up; ¹⁵ so that whoever believes will in Him have eternal life. ¹⁶ For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life.

That last incident of grumbling is amazingly connected to a monument, a symbol, of God's great grace to save.

Moses Strikes the Rock (20:1-29)

Let's turn back now to the example of grumbling I skipped in chapter 20. On our timeline, the rebellion with Korah seemed to happen at the beginning of the 40 years in the wilderness. This example seems to happen at the end.

20:1 tells us the people arrived at Kadesh during the first month. And we are not told the year. I think we can guess the year. After chapter 20, events are going to start to pick up speed with Israel on the move to the Jordan river, experiencing opposition and doing+

battle along the way. In chapter 20, the deaths of both Miriam and Aaron are reported. Chapter 20 also has Israel returning to Kadesh, the site from which Israel failed to enter the promise land. I believe we are supposed to deduce that this is the beginning of the end of the wandering. We are in the first month of the 40th year. The end of the period is marked by the deaths of two of the most prominent leaders of the first generation in the same place where the failure of that generation took place. In a sense, we are back where we started, and yet, the death of Miriam punctuates how much this generation lost.

It is not hard to feel great sympathy for Moses. His has carried this faithless generation for 40 years. Now, his sister has died. And right on cue the grumbling of the people rattles through the camp. Numbers 20:2-5.

² There was no water for the congregation, and they assembled themselves against Moses and Aaron. ³ The people thus contended with Moses and spoke, saying, "If only we had perished when our brothers perished before the LORD! ⁴ Why then have you brought the LORD'S assembly into this wilderness, for us and our beasts to die here? ⁵ Why have you made us come up from Egypt, to bring us in to this wretched place? It is not a place of grain or figs or vines or pomegranates, nor is there water to drink."

It is amazing to me that Moses did not snap right there. He does not respond, though. God appears to him and to Aaron and says,

⁸ "Take the rod; and you and your brother Aaron assemble the congregation and speak to the rock before their eyes, that it may yield its water. You shall thus bring forth water for them out of the rock and let the congregation and their beasts drink."

So, Moses gathers the people and says to them,

¹⁰ ...“Listen now, you rebels; shall we bring forth water for you out of this rock?” ¹¹ Then Moses lifted up his hand and struck the rock twice with his rod; and water came forth abundantly, and the congregation and their beasts drank.

Now Moses snaps. His anger came out against the people. And God was not pleased. God responds quite harsh in the next verse saying,

¹² ...“Because you have not believed Me, to treat Me as holy in the sight of the sons of Israel, therefore you shall not bring this assembly into the land which I have given them.”

That is quite severe. After all his labor and all his faith, bearing this stubborn people, Moses now is not going to be allowed to enter the promise land with the next generation. He will die in the desert with the Grumbling Generation. And for what? What did he do? Now, we have talked before about how biblical narrative rarely states the nature of a person's heart. We infer that inner reality by the response of God or by the following consequences that work out in the narrative. The words of God here are not the patient words Abraham received when he complained of having no child. This harsh punishment immediately reveals God's displeasure, so we know right away that something is going on in Moses' heart.

The text gives us two small hints. First, in his angry confrontation with the people, Moses says, “Listen now, you rebels; shall we bring forth water for you out of this rock?” Moses says “we.” “Shall we bring forth water for you?” He puts the intention on himself and Aaron, communicating that they are the ones with power to provide water. The text then tells us that Moses, “lifted up his hand and struck the rock twice with his rod.” God had not told him to strike the rock. God told Moses to speak to the rock.

And normally, that would probably not be a big deal. The point is not that God hands out harsh punishment to people who fail to get the details exactly right. God is not concerned with whether you speak to the rock or strike the rock. Way back in Exodus God told Moses to strike the rock to bring out water. Here he tells him to speak to the rock. Speaking is an acceptable way, striking is an acceptable way. What matters is the state of Moses' heart. Did he choose to strike the rock as a communication of his anger, to show his power, to bring the focus of attention on himself? Yes, he did. Yes, he did. That is why God is so angry. These two points, “shall we bring forth water” and the striking of the rock, they might suggest something. We are not sure at first. God's response clarifies the issue for us. In his rebellion Korah charged Moses for exalting himself over the assembly of the Lord. That was a false charge. But here Moses makes it true. In a moment of anger, he does exalt himself above the assembly. And God sees the anger operating in his heart. God sees bitterness take root. A foothold has been opened for Satan to use. I am reading into that a little bit. I can't exactly explain the state of Moses' heart. I am really not sure. I am guessing. What I know is that God sees something. And God sees something that makes him angry.

We know that Moses has sinned. We cannot see exactly how, but the immediate rebuke of God makes clear that there is sin going on. But even recognizing that Moses snapped, giving into anger or frustration or pride, why such a harsh punishment? His sister just died. He has borne this people for 40 years. To this point he has always deferred to God. He always allows God to validate his leadership, to exalt him. He has argued with God for the people. He has shown righteous anger, and he has shown sacrificial compassion. Why would God be so harsh in this one small slip up to forbid Moses entry into the promise land? Moses was the one person who has faithfully held on to the vision of the promise land, and now God says, “You will not enter in.” Wow, God. That really does not seem compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, full of lovingkindness and truth. Is that the way you treat your long-suffering servants?

But here is one of the problems in judging God's judgments. We only see what is. God sees what would have been if he had not stepped in with discipline. We cannot know what God prevented.

Where might the heart of Moses gone, if God had not intervened? How many leaders fail in their last years of ministry out of fatigue or busyness or lost relationship with God? And if the leader falls, what might be the consequence for the community? It is one thing when a single man falls. It is another when a leader of thousands falls.

What might have been? Let's consider another case. This is also a case of severe punishment. And it is a case of what might have been. I am using my imagination. I can't really know. I am trying to put myself into God's place, to see what he might see that we do not see. I am thinking of the case of Ananias and Saphira. It is a New Testament example. Our current example is during a critical period of transition at the birth of Israel. Theirs is also a critical time period at the birth of the church. People are selling land and giving proceeds to the church to help fund the revival going on in Jerusalem. Ananias and Saphira sell a piece of land and give only a portion to the church. And God is not concerned with whether they give all, or they only give a portion. The problem is that they lie about it. And when confronted with the lie, Ananias says, "We gave the whole sum." And God strikes him dead. And then Saphira comes in later, not knowing Ananias has been struck dead, and repeats the lie, falling dead in her turn. Why such a harsh punishment? We do not know. But we can imagine.

In lying about giving the whole sum, Ananias and Saphira are copying someone else who really did sell a piece of land and give the whole, give everything he received to the church. And they want the same recognition they saw that guy receive. Do you remember who it is? Who's the guy who sold the piece of land and then gave all the money to the church? It is Barnabas. And it is mentioned right before the story of Ananias and Saphira. So, we are supposed to make that connection. Now, some time later, the church has been scattered and news comes to the apostles that through the witness of some who were scattered, Jews and Gentiles in the coastal city of Antioch have believed in Jesus. And they decide to send Barnabas to see what God is doing and to strengthen the work. Now this is where I am using my imagination. What if God had not struck down Ananias and Saphira? What if they had continued on as leaders in the church? And what if the apostle sent them to lead the young movement in Antioch?

Something of huge significance happens in Antioch. Barnabas goes and begins a ministry of teaching, then he thinks about that former Pharisee Paul who is not far away in Tarsus. No one has heard from Paul for a while. After Jewish leaders sought his death, and he was sent from Jerusalem, he dropped out of the story of Acts. But Barnabas, son of encouragement, did not forget Paul or the power of his teaching. Barnabas thought, this is exactly what Paul needs. I will go get Paul. It's a win-win. It will be good for Antioch. It will be good for Paul. So, Barnabas goes and recruits Paul to come help him. Does Ananias, if Ananias is leading the church in Antioch, does Ananias ever go and get someone like Paul to help him in ministry? He is the top man in Antioch. They all look to him as the one sent from the apostles. He is teaching. The work is growing. Does Ananias go and get someone with a better testimony, better training, more powerful preaching to come join him in the work? No. That never happens. Ananias is concerned with his own image; his own position. He would never invite someone like Paul to come join him. Maybe someone lower than him that he can mentor. And he can still be the top guy. But not Paul. The fledgling church would be without Paul. We would have no work of Paul, no missionary journeys, no letter to the churches in Rome or Galatia or Ephesus or everything else Paul wrote. None of it would exist.

Now, I am not saying that we have any idea that the apostles really would have sent Ananias and Saphira. I am saying that leaders make an impact. And we can imagine what kind of impact Ananias and Saphira might have had if God did not remove them.

God protected the early church from the hypocritical, self-centered leadership of Ananias and Saphira. We never know what God's harsh discipline may be protecting the church from. We see what is. God sees what would be. Coming back to Numbers we are faced with the same problem. God sees what might be. We do not know whether this is the moment that the leader's heart is turned; that this is the moment the root of bitterness takes hold in Moses; the moment that Satan

gets a foothold; the moment Moses builds a wall between himself and God. Was this that small, yet critical moment, that the heart of Moses changes course. It has been said that power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely. Now, that is not an exact truism, but it communicates a lot of wisdom. How many men can navigate with integrity the kind of authority given Moses over an entire nation where he has served in the roles of prophet, priest, and king? How many men can serve in such a position without giving in to the pull of pride and power? We empathize with Moses over the death of his sister and the constant grumbling of the people. We empathize. We have compassion. At the same time, we also know the human heart, and we can imagine the dark grip of bitterness finally taking hold in his heart.

God sees something. We do not know what he sees. But he sees something. And it is ugly. It has the potential to derail the whole ministry of Moses, to topple Moses and the people of Israel with him. God grabs hold of that worm and crushes the life out of it. The harsh discipline of God is also the abundant grace of God. I believe the Lord here is strengthening Moses to finish out the race set before him. He has still got to get the people to the Jordan river, he has still got to transfer power to Joshua, he still has to write the first five books of the Bible. None of that has happened, yet. The rebuke of God works as a surgeon's knife to cut out the cancer just beginning to form, resulting in new strength of heart and soul.

There is no retort from Moses, no complaint. I believe he saw where his heart was taking him. I do not know how long it took him to see the punishment as grace. I imagine it was a struggle over time to come to terms with what had happened. Moses is a real man. The rebuke and punishment could not have been easy to receive. He really did want to go into the promise land. He was still talking to God about it even after he had settled the people in the plain of Moab just across the Jordan river. He wrote about his longing in Deuteronomy 3:23-28. He says this.

²³ "I also pleaded with the LORD at that time, saying, ²⁴ 'O Lord GOD, You have begun to show Your servant Your greatness and Your strong hand; for what god is there in heaven or on earth who can do such works and mighty acts as Yours?' ²⁵ Let me, I pray, cross over and see the fair land that is beyond the Jordan, that good hill country and Lebanon.' ²⁶ But the LORD was angry with me on your account, and would not listen to me; and the LORD said to me, 'Enough! Speak to Me no more of this matter. ²⁷ Go up to the top of Pisgah and lift up your eyes to the west and north and south and east, and see *it* with your eyes, for you shall not cross over this Jordan. ²⁸ But charge Joshua and encourage him and strengthen him, for he shall go across at the head of this people, and he will give them as an inheritance the land which you will see.'"

I imagine that Moses came to terms with this reality before he died. His role was not to take the people into the land. And whether or not that was a result of sin, God would incorporate that into his good plan for the next generation. Moses stayed faithful and true to the end. And the death of Moses provided for a better transition of new leadership. Joshua had to step up. Joshua had to lead the people into the promise land. It would be time for new leadership over a new generation. And that would work better if Moses was held back and Joshua went on. God works things out for the good of those who love him even when working that out is a consequence of our sin.

I want to end by adding two additional lessons of leadership to the four we considered in our last lesson.

1. First, we see here the principle that leaders are held to a higher level of accountability. The discipline on Moses is quite harsh. As a leader the temptations are intensified, and the consequences are more damaging to a greater number of people. So, the accountability is higher.
2. Second, God works the failures of leaders into his own good purposes. Perhaps a leader ought to pursue a vision of perfection, striving to be holy as God is holy. But the healthy leader also knows that is not an attainable goal on this side of heaven. It is a direction to move in. A high goal to shoot for. But not a realistic standard to judge oneself by. Integrity requires honest confession of sin and failures and mistakes. Integrity requires letting go the phantom of perfection. There is something

quite wrong with the perfect leader. A leader who comes across as perfect, must be working a bit too hard at hiding his flaws. A flawless leader is a good actor. This is why leaders have to have people with whom they can be real. Or the little failures of pride and lust and bitterness will take hold, eventually root secretly and grow in a dark closet, finally coming to light with devastating effect. Leaders need friends who will stand in the place of God and communicate loving rebuke. A leader who cannot take rebuke is a timebomb slowly ticking. We honor, respect, and support our leaders, but we do not put them on the impossible pedestal of perfection. They must be allowed to fail and encouraged to get up and keep going. So, that don't get to that place when they do fail it is a catastrophe, and they really are disqualified from ministry.

God's rebuke of Moses was harsh, but in its harshness, it was also gracious. God sees what we do not. The heart of his leader was turning. And God directed it back on course, both for the sake of Moses and for the sake of the people. May God rebuke you. And may God rebuke me, and keep our hearts flowing fresh, as we receive rebuke, confess our sin, receive his forgiveness, and are filled with the goodness of his Spirit as we continue to walk with him.

Reflection Questions

1. What stands out to you as important or strange or interesting or confusing as you read about the rebellion of Korah in Numbers 16:1-40?
2. Go back and observe Numbers 12:1-15. What stands out to you in the rebellion of Miriam and Aaron?
3. Compare these two rebellions.
 - a. What stands out to you when you compare the words and actions of Moses? What is similar or different?
 - b. What stands out to you when you compare the words and actions of God? What is similar or different?
 - c. What stands out to you when you compare the words and actions of those opposing Moses and Aaron? What is similar or different?
4. Considering God's tough love discipline on Moses in Numbers 20, how might that put God's discipline of Miriam in a new light. In what way was that discipline potentially protective and in what way restorative?
5. What do you see different about Moses' words and behavior in Numbers 20 from these two earlier cases of rebellion? Can you imagine the potential turning of Moses' heart in Numbers 20? Thinking of other human leaders describe a potential scenario that begins with this moment for Moses. Describe what might have happened in his heart, how that might of affected his heart over time, how that might have affected his behavior over time, and what effects that may have had on the ministry of Moses and on the Israelites.
6. Describe a situation when you think God disciplined you for your own benefit and for the benefit of people you love and influence.

Lesson 22: Numbers 22-25 Balaam Blesses God's People (Wandering, part 3)

Introduction

Numbers: Kingdom Rebellion

Key Passage: 14:20-23

| 1:1-10:10 | 10:11-25:18 | 26-36 |
|--------------------------------|-------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| Preparation to enter the land | Wandering in the desert | Preparation to enter the land |
| Census of the first generation | Death of the first generation | Census of the second generation |

The reports of grumbling in the book of Numbers end with the plague of serpents described in the first half of chapter 21. No more grumbling. But we are not quite done with the first generation. Their end is described in chapter 26 after the taking of the second census. We get this report in 26:64-65.

⁶⁴ But among these there was not a man of those who were numbered by Moses and Aaron the priest, who numbered the sons of Israel in the wilderness of Sinai. ⁶⁵ For the LORD had said of them, "They shall surely die in the wilderness." And not a man was left of them, except Caleb the son of Jephunneh and Joshua the son of Nun.

From that last report of grumbling to this second census, that's from chapter 21 through chapter 25, the narrative is transitioning from the first generation to the second. The transition starts and ends well highlighting the faithfulness of the second generation. But in between we get the odd and intriguing story of Balaam. First let's look at how the Israelites get settled beside the Jordan river just outside the promise land. And then we will concentrate in on Balaam.

Defeat of Sihon and Og (Numbers 21:21-35)

The transition from one generation to the next starts with a major victory for the Israelites. The river Jordan is the Eastern boarder of the promise land. It runs fairly straight from North to South with a sea on either end. So, starting from the sea of Galilee in the North the river flows due South into the Dead Sea. That straight parallel line has four perpendicular lines jutting out to the East away from the promise land. These four rivers, the Zered, Arnon, Jabbok, and Yarmuk form the boundaries of the peoples who live just East of Canaan. The Zered pokes out from the bottom of the Dead Sea, marking the boundary between Edom and Moab. The Arnon juts out half way up the Dead Sea, marking the boundary between Moab and the Amorite King Sihon. Above Sihon is another Amorite King named Og. The Moabites used to have more land, but Sihon took it from them. That will be an issue later.

In Numbers 21:21 the Israelites have completed their journeys around Edom and around Moab. God forbade them to fight with those two peoples. They have crossed over the Arnon river into Amorite territory. And hey make it all the way up past the Dead Sea before being confronted by Sihon. And when he challenges them, the Israelites ask for passage through his territory to continue further up the Jordan and then cross over into the promise land. Sihon does not trust them. And in those days, it is hard to blame him. Or maybe he is tempted by the potential plunder. For whatever reason, he says, "No" and attacks. But this hardened generation of desert wanderers is no easy prey. More importantly, they have got God on their side. And they defeat Sihon and take all his territory, from the Arnon river up north to the Jabbok, which sticks out half-way up the Jordan river. The captured territory includes already established towns, and cultivated vineyards, and livestock.

The Israelites decide to keep going, and they take the next section of land as well, from the Jabbok all the way to the Yarmuk, which pokes out of the sea of Galilee. So, now they are from the Dead Sea all the way up to the Sea of Galilee. And at that point the Amorite King King Og opposes them and pays for it. They take possession of his land. In the Bible, it is the land of Bashan which extends north even further pass the Sea of Galilee. Today that land is known as the Golan Heights. With all this strategic highland to the East of the promise land now in their possession, Israel makes camp in the plains of

Moab across the Jordan from Jericho. They took this land from Sihon, but we are told that Sihon had taken it from Moab. So, Moab has a double problem with Israel. They are terrified, witnessing the fighting capabilities of this large nation that is now camped to their North. And the Israelites are camped in territory they claim as their own. And this is going to set up the intriguing Bible story, the story of Balaam's blessing or probably better known as Balaam and the donkey.

Balaam's Blessing (Numbers 22-25; 31)

We start with Balaam being humbled in Numbers 22:1-35.

Balaam humbled (22:1-35)

Afraid to engage battle with Israel, Balak the king of Moab comes up with a strategy to gain an upper edge. The strategy fits the Ancient Near Eastern worldview that battles are in reality fought by the gods, that's the most important battle, which is only mirrored on earth by men. The key is to turn a nation's god against that nation or to get the god to flee. So, Balak sends for spiritual aid to the internationally renowned Balaam, a famous prophet-diviner living far up North near the Euphrates river. The land of two rivers is one of two seats of ancient civilization in this whole region. The other is down South in Egypt. Up North, power changes hands as the centuries pass from the Empire of Ur in the time of Abraham, to the Old Assyrian and Old Babylonian Empires who both lose power only to gain it again when we have the New Assyrian and New Babylonian empires to be overthrown in turn by the Persians. But it is almost like the culture just stays the same. It passes from owner to owner, but there is this continuous Mesopotamian seat of culture that was begun thousands of years before by the Sumerians. And by the time of Moses these civilizations, they are looking back on more than 1500 years of recorded, written history. So, I don't think it is surprising that a prophet of international renown would live in the vicinity of this northern center of Ancient Near East culture.

Originally, the people between the two rivers were ethnic Sumerians. But a couple hundred years before Abraham, Amorite barbarians invaded, taking control of such venerated places as the city of Babylon and mixed in with the Sumerians, making the region bilingual. These Amorites are Semites, a linguistic designation that puts their language in the same family as Hebrew. So, Balaam was likely from a Semitic group just as Abraham before him had been.

The distance from Moab to Balaam's home would have been significant, about 725 kilometers or 450 miles. One way might take the messengers a month. Balak's messengers make the trip. Here is the first interaction between the messengers of Balak, King of Moab and the famous, probably Semitic, prophet-diviner Balaam. This is Number 22:5-14, starting with Balak telling his messengers what to say.

⁵ ... "Behold, a people came out of Egypt; behold, they cover the surface of the land, and they are living opposite me. ⁶ Now, therefore, please come, curse this people for me since they are too mighty for me; perhaps I may be able to defeat them and drive them out of the land. For I know that he whom you bless is blessed, and he whom you curse is cursed." ⁷ So the elders of Moab and the elders of Midian departed with the *fees* for divination in their hand; and they came to Balaam and repeated Balak's words to him. ⁸ He said to them, "Spend the night here, and I will bring word back to you as the LORD may speak to me." And the leaders of Moab stayed with Balaam. ⁹ Then God came to Balaam and said, "Who are these men with you?" ¹⁰ Balaam said to God, "Balak the son of Zippor, king of Moab, has sent *word* to me, ¹¹ 'Behold, there is a people who came out of Egypt and they cover the surface of the land; now come, curse them for me; perhaps I may be able to fight against them and drive them out.' " ¹² God said to Balaam, "Do not go with them; you shall not curse the people, for they are blessed." ¹³ So Balaam arose in the morning and said to Balak's leaders, "Go back to your land, for the LORD has refused to let me go with you." ¹⁴ The leaders of Moab arose and went to Balak and said, "Balaam refused to come with us."

There is some curious stuff here. The text says that God spoke to Balaam; not a god, but God, Elohim, the unique term for God used by the Hebrews. Who is this Balaam? Is he good, is he bad? Is he like

Melchizedek, the non-Hebrew priest to whom Abraham paid tithe? Is he like the wise men who come later from up in the same region to worship Jesus? How does this guy hear from God? How does he speak with God? The text says that the elders of Moab and Midian pay him fees for divination. Well, that is not a good sign. We read ancient texts of battles which are not fought until generals' diviners see the right sign: an eagle that flies by or a telling shape in the entrails of the sacrificed lamb or something in the formation of the clouds or by casting lots. And the practice of divination was specifically forbidden in Leviticus 19:26. So, to call Balaam a diviner makes us wonder about his character. Who is this guy? But God talks to Balaam, and Balaam talks back to God. More importantly, Balaam obeys God. Balaam even uses the covenant name of God, saying, "Go back to your land, for the LORD [Yahweh] has refused to let me go with you."

This is really curious. Who is this guy? That's a great question. The story has not yet revealed much. That means we are not supposed to know much yet. We need to keep reading and see how the narrative unfolds. First, the messengers have to make the one-month trip back to Moab. When they do, Balak sends more distinguished messengers back to Balaam with a promise of more money and more honor. Numbers 22:16-22:

¹⁶ They came to Balaam and said to him, "Thus says Balak the son of Zippor, 'Let nothing, I beg you, hinder you from coming to me; ¹⁷ for I will indeed honor you richly, and I will do whatever you say to me. Please come then, curse this people for me.' " ¹⁸ Balaam replied to the servants of Balak, "Though Balak were to give me his house full of silver and gold, I could not do anything, either small or great, contrary to the command of the LORD my God. ¹⁹ Now please, you also stay here tonight, and I will find out what else the LORD will speak to me." ²⁰ God came to Balaam at night and said to him, "If the men have come to call you, rise up *and* go with them; but only the word which I speak to you shall you do." ²¹ So Balaam arose in the morning, and saddled his donkey and went with the leaders of Moab. ²² But God was angry because he was going, and the angel of the LORD took his stand in the way as an adversary against him.

What does verse 18 suggest about Balaam? "Though Balak were to give me his house full of silver and gold, I could not do anything, either small or great, contrary to the command of the LORD my God." That sounds pretty faithful to God. Here Balaam calls Yahweh "my God," at the same time that he refuses to accept money contrary to his understanding of God's will. So far, so good. God then tells Balaam to go with the men. So, Balaam rises up early to go. But then God gets angry that he is going and sends an angel to oppose him. Wait a minute. God tells him to go, then God gets angry that he is going. Well, that's not fair at all. That makes no sense.

That's at least one of the typical responses I get from students when we study this text. That makes no sense. And you know what, that's right. Exactly! That makes no sense. So, what do we do with it? This is exactly the kind of passage I love to stumble across in Scripture. I have a really high view of the literary quality of the Bible. I don't think this is in here as a mistake. And I have a high view of the character of God. So, when I come to something that looks incongruent or contradictory, I sit up and pay attention. This is intentional. This is a challenge from the author to make the reader think.

It doesn't make sense. What is going on? Surprise and tension are both building blocks of a great story. And we have got both here. The text quickly turns on us. We doubted Balaam at the start when the text said he was sent a diviner's payment. What kind of pagan guy is this? But then he conversed with God. And he called Yahweh his God. And he refused payment. This sounds like a good guy, a Melchizedek kind of guy. God's anger surprises us. Especially since God just told him to go.

Once again, we face that reality of biblical interpretation that the text often does not tell us the state of a person's heart but expects us to infer the state of the heart according to the consequences that follow or according to God's interaction with the person. God's anger indicates that something is wrong with Balaam's heart. We will have to see if that plays out in the narrative. We are wise to remember that just because someone claims the name of Yahweh, that does not mean that they have submitted to covenant relationship with Yahweh. God talks to people who have not trusted in

him. And God uses whole nations that are opposed to him. There is one little hint in the text that becomes noticeable after God becomes angry. God had said to Balaam, "Go with them; but only the word which I speak to you shall you do." That is a caution. So far it seems like Balaam is okay with that. He has said that he cannot speak contrary to the command of the LORD. But what exactly does Balaam mean by that? He could mean that he is not willing to speak contrary to the LORD. "I would never, I would never say something contrary to what I think that the LORD has said." He could also literally mean that he is not able to speak contrary to the LORD. If that is the case, he is telling the Moabite elders that he is not the one in control of the outcome. He has some kind of spiritual process that he has to follow. And whether he is being sincere about that or not sincere, he is letting them know, "I am not in control of this. The LORD is in control of this."

We can only wonder about God's anger here. We can think about it. But the text does not give us the state of Balaam's heart. We have to read on and see how it goes. Here is Numbers 22:22-33.

Now he was riding on his donkey and his two servants were with him. ²³ When the donkey saw the angel of the LORD standing in the way with his drawn sword in his hand, the donkey turned off from the way and went into the field; but Balaam struck the donkey to turn her back into the way. ²⁴ Then the angel of the LORD stood in a narrow path of the vineyards, *with* a wall on this side and a wall on that side. ²⁵ When the donkey saw the angel of the LORD, she pressed herself to the wall and pressed Balaam's foot against the wall, so he struck her again. ²⁶ The angel of the LORD went further, and stood in a narrow place where there was no way to turn to the right hand or the left. ²⁷ When the donkey saw the angel of the LORD, she lay down under Balaam; so Balaam was angry and struck the donkey with his stick. ²⁸ And the LORD opened the mouth of the donkey, and she said to Balaam, "What have I done to you, that you have struck me these three times?" ²⁹ Then Balaam said to the donkey, "Because you have made a mockery of me! If there had been a sword in my hand, I would have killed you by now." ³⁰ The donkey said to Balaam, "Am I not your donkey on which you have ridden all your life to this day? Have I ever been accustomed to do so to you?" And he said, "No." ³¹ Then the LORD opened the eyes of Balaam, and he saw the angel of the LORD standing in the way with his drawn sword in his hand; and he bowed all the way to the ground. ³² The angel of the LORD said to him, "Why have you struck your donkey these three times? Behold, I have come out as an adversary, because your way was contrary to me. ³³ "But the donkey saw me and turned aside from me these three times. If she had not turned aside from me, I would surely have killed you just now, and let her live."

Of course, the first thing we want to know is what is going on here with the donkey speaking. Did God cause Balaam to hallucinate that the donkey was speaking, such that it was just in his mind? Did God speak for the donkey? Or did God actually give the donkey speech? We don't know. And we shouldn't let our curiosity, it's okay to have curiosity, but we shouldn't let our curiosity about the donkey distract us from the incredible irony that God has created in this story. Who is the great prophet-diviner here? Well, it's not the donkey. But who sees the spiritual reality? Who is aware of the spiritual danger? Well, it's not Balaam. The famous international diviner does not see a thing. The donkey has all the insight. The donkey speaks the truth. That's humiliating and telling.

I wonder if Moses wants us to remember what God told him at his calling by the burning bush. God kept saying he had chosen Moses, and Moses kept pushing back, "I have never been eloquent...for I am slow of speech and slow of tongue (Exodus 4:10)." Getting frustrated by this point, God rebukes Moses, "Who has made man's mouth? Or who makes him dumb or deaf, or seeing or blind? Is it not I, the LORD? Now then go, and I, even I, will be with your mouth, and teach you what you are to say (Exodus 3:11-12)."

Balaam receives a similar rebuke. And he seems to really receive it. It does not mean that he is fully God's man, but he is humbled, and he does repent. He seems to get something out of it.

³⁴ Balaam said to the angel of the LORD, "I have sinned, for I did not know that you were standing in the way against me. Now then, if it is displeasing to you, I will turn back." ³⁵ But the angel of the LORD said to Balaam, "Go with the men, but you shall speak only the word which I tell you." So Balaam went along with the leaders of Balak.

Did you notice the repetition? "Go with the men, but you shall speak only the word which I tell you." That is the same thing God told Balaam before he left, right before he got mad at him. The repetition affirms that we are dealing with some kind of heart issue. Balaam had gone, but in some sense, he was going on his own terms. And God needs to give him some kind of heart adjustment, a humbling. That's what happens with the donkey. Now God determines that Balaam really is ready to go. Maybe now he has learned the lesson that Joseph understood about true prophecy, "It is not in me; God will give Pharaoh a favorable answer (Genesis 41:16)."

Balaam made to speak (22:36-24:25)

Balaam has been humbled. Now God will make him speak. When he arrives in Moab, Balak is a bit peeved that he did not come the first time he was asked. We see that in Numbers 22:36-38.

³⁶ When Balak heard that Balaam was coming, he went out to meet him at the city of Moab, which is on the Arnon border, at the extreme end of the border. ³⁷ Then Balak said to Balaam, "Did I not urgently send to you to call you? Why did you not come to me? Am I really unable to honor you?" ³⁸ So Balaam said to Balak, "Behold, I have come now to you! Am I able to speak anything at all? The word that God puts in my mouth, that I shall speak."

Seems like Balaam learned the lesson of the donkey. Balaam will make three attempts at a curse and then add a plus one prophecy for free. I am not going to read through all four prophecies but will hit some highlights. To establish the pattern, let's do read the first example, both how Balak sets everything up and the words of the curse. Numbers 22:39-23:6:

³⁹ And Balaam went with Balak, and they came to Kiriath-huzoth. ⁴⁰ Balak sacrificed oxen and sheep, and sent *some* to Balaam and the leaders who were with him. ⁴¹ Then it came about in the morning that Balak took Balaam and brought him up to the high places of Baal, and he saw from there a portion of the people. ¹ Then Balaam said to Balak, "Build seven altars for me here, and prepare seven bulls and seven rams for me here." ² Balak did just as Balaam had spoken, and Balak and Balaam offered up a bull and a ram on each altar. ³ Then Balaam said to Balak, "Stand beside your burnt offering, and I will go; perhaps the LORD will come to meet me, and whatever He shows me I will tell you." So he went to a bare hill. ⁴ Now God met Balaam, and he said to Him, "I have set up the seven altars, and I have offered up a bull and a ram on each altar." ⁵ Then the LORD put a word in Balaam's mouth and said, "Return to Balak, and you shall speak thus." ⁶ So he returned to him, and behold, he was standing beside his burnt offering, he and all the leaders of Moab.

They are at a Moabite town. Balak makes sacrifice for a feast for Balaam and the elders. Then Balaam goes up on a hill and hears from God. He then tells Balak to prepare a costly sacrifice of seven bulls and seven rams. Then Balaam goes up on the hill again after the sacrifice and he comes down and delivers the curse. That is Numbers 23:7-10:

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| "From Aram Balak has brought me, | Moab's king from the mountains of the East, |
| 'Come curse Jacob for me, | And come, denounce Israel! |
| ⁸ "How shall I curse whom God has not cursed? | And how can I denounce whom the LORD |
| | has not denounced? |
| ⁹ "As I see him from the top of the rocks, | And I look at him from the hills; |
| Behold, a people <i>who</i> dwells apart, | And will not be reckoned among the nations. |
| ¹⁰ "Who can count the dust of Jacob, | Or number the fourth part of Israel? |
| Let me die the death of the upright, | And let my end be like his!" |

Well, the curse turns out to be not much of a curse at all but more a prophecy of blessing. In the second phrase of verse 8 Balaam clearly invokes Yahweh, “How can I denounce whom Yahweh has not?” We still do not know Balaam’s exact relationship to Yahweh. We do not know whether Balaam earned his fame calling on Yahweh or whether the point was to call on the specific god of the people you are trying to curse. Is he only calling on Yahweh because he has been asked to curse Israel? Maybe that’s the way you do it. We don’t know. We just know that Balaam keeps his communication directed to Yahweh. And he is made to speak the words that God puts into his mouth. The lesson of the donkey is being played out.

Balak is not happy. But he decides to try again, making one change. He takes Balaam to a place of higher elevation. Let's get up closer to God. He will try the same thing the third time. This time Balaam just went up on a hill outside of the city. Next Balak will try a field at the top of Mount Pisgah. Finally, he tries the top of Mount Peor, even higher up, saying, "Perhaps it will be agreeable to God that you curse them for me there (23:27)." Balak treats God like all pagans treat God whether they are ancient pagans or modern pagans. Also, sometimes the way we treat God, if we change up the formula maybe we can please God or manipulate him into doing what we want him to do. Balak's part is to change the height, the location of the prophecy. We also notice change within the prophecies.

For example, Balaam's spiritual insight seems to increase with each. He begins the third and fourth this way.

"The oracle of Balaam the son of Beor,
And the oracle of the man whose eye is opened;
⁴ The oracle of him who hears the words of God,
Who sees the vision of the Almighty,
Falling down, yet having his eyes uncovered,

We have the speaking lesson from the donkey. Balaam can only speak what God gives him to speak. These words focus on the seeing lesson from the donkey. Spiritual truth can only be understood if God gives a person eyes to see. The verse, “Falling down, yet having his eyes uncovered,” applies to the humiliating experience with the donkey. It is often necessary to be humbled in order to truly see. Balaam was humbled. And in being humbled, his eyes are uncovered, “falling down, yet having his eyes uncovered” he sees.

Balak has increased the height to try to get closer to God. But God has taught Balaam the message that you can't speak what I don't give you to speak and you can't see what I don't let you see. I am in control of this and you don't manipulate me to curse Israel. And so, the move backfires. Balak tries to manipulate God. It is not going to work. And what happens is an ever-increasing blessing for Israel from oracle to oracle. We see an intensification and heightening of Israel's strength and position. In the first oracle, the Israelites are simply "a people who dwells apart" and a people who "cannot be counted." In the second oracle, we are told "the shout of the king is among them (23:21)." And they are described as a lioness that "will not lie down until it devours the prey (23:24)." That's not something the King of Moab wants to hear. It is heightened in the third oracle, Israel is described as a spreading garden, "And his king shall be higher than Agag, and his kingdom shall be exalted (24:7)." This nation goes to battle with horns of a wild ox. And now he is a male lion. "He couches, he lies down as a lion, and as a lion, who dares rouse him (24:9)?" After the third oracle, Balak's anger burns against Balaam. And with good reason. Brought in to curse Israel, Balaam curses Moab. And he uses the words of the Abrahamic promise to do it. He ends this third oracle this way, speaking about Israel, "Blessed is everyone who blesses you, and cursed is everyone who curses you (24:9)." Who is cursing Israel? Moab. So, who is going to be cursed? Moab.

Balak ends Balaam's employment without honor, without pay. It seems a mark of Balaam's reputation that Balak does not end his life as well. Balaam responds, "What else could I do? I can only say what is given me to say." Then he adds an unasked for oracle that lifts Israel up to an even higher point. The oracles have successively heightened the language of kingship and of military might. This last one goes even a step further. This is Numbers 24:17b-18.

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| A star shall come forth from Jacob,
And shall crush through the forehead of Moab,
¹⁸ Edom shall be a possession, | A scepter shall rise from Israel,
And tear down all the sons of Sheth.
Seir, its enemies, also will be a possession,
While Israel performs valiantly. |
|---|--|

This prophecy takes the proclamation of king in Israel to a whole new height, especially from our vantage point looking back. We see that this is going to be king David but even beyond king David, this is messianic! "A star shall come forth from Jacob, a scepter shall rise from Israel." Balaam ends as one of the great prophets of the Old Testament. His oracles make it into the text of Scripture as "thus saith the Lord." He spoke the very word of God. And there is little in his interaction with Balak to make us doubt Balaam's faithfulness. There is only one little hint of foreshadowing that readers would miss the first few times they read the story. But then you read it enough, you see a connection. When Balak fired Balaam, Balaam said to Balak, "And now, behold, I am going to my people; come, *and* I will advise you what this people will do to your people in the days to come (24:14)." "I will advise you." What does that mean? What kind of advice? Well, at first it sounds like a parting shot where Balaam says that he is going to tell Balak how badly Israel is going to beat up on Moab in days to come. That is sort of what he just said about his prophecy of king David coming and crushing the forehead of Moab. But is that all this means or alludes to? Does Balaam have some other advice or counsel for Balak? We are going to see.

Balaam and the Sin at Peor (25 and 31)

So, after we receive this wonderful prophecy of blessing and grandeur for Israel which includes the language of Abrahamic covenant and a foreshadowing of the future Messiah, we are reminded of the great problem of human covenant with Yahweh. We are going to see this with the sin at Peor. How does the burning, holy fire of God dwell on the dry bush that is Israel? The first generation out of Egypt seems particularly skilled in pointing out how big a problem this is. This is Numbers 25:1-5.

¹ While Israel remained at Shittim, the people began to play the harlot with the daughters of Moab. ² For they invited the people to the sacrifices of their gods, and the people ate and bowed down to their gods. ³ So Israel joined themselves to Baal of Peor, and the LORD was angry against Israel. ⁴ The LORD said to Moses, "Take all the leaders of the people and execute them in broad daylight before the LORD, so that the fierce anger of the LORD may turn away from Israel." ⁵ So Moses said to the judges of Israel, "Each of you slay his men who have joined themselves to Baal of Peor."

The sin of Peor involves harlotry in both the literally sense of sexual relations with the Moabites and Midianites, and also the metaphoric sense of false worship with other gods. The dynamic here has a parallel with Exodus. At the beginning of the Balaam story the enemy appears to be outside Israel. Nations want to go to war against and so, seek spiritual power to add them in that effort. God turns their strategy back against them, declaring his intent to protect Israel, lifting them up as a mighty nation victorious over their enemies. In Exodus the big problem appeared to be Egypt. Here the big problem seems to be the Moab-Midian alliance.

But in the very next chapter after Balaam's prophecy, we immediately see, as with the Exodus story, that the enemy to worry about is not outside the people of God but inside the people of God. It is their own sinful hearts and their own lack of spiritual fortitude that is going to be their downfall. Without have even crossed the river Jordan yet, the people disobey the warning, the specific warning that God gave them at Sinai, not to cave in to pagan culture, not to be attracted away through relationship, through romantic relationship, to accept and embrace this pagan culture. But they willingly go, they are tempted into the worship of gods that are not God.

The sin of Peor ends with Phinehas, a grandson of Aaron, who acts on Moses' command and executes a brazen Israelite who flaunts his relationship with a Midianite woman in the middle of the Israelite camp. And God praises Phineas, saying of him, "he was jealous with my jealousy among them, so that I did not destroy the sons of Israel in my jealousy." The zeal of Phineas became famous

in Israel as the example of a man whose heart is really burning for the glory of God. This Phineas was a priest of the second generation out of Egypt. And his action, even though it is a very harsh action, a harsh judgment coming in the middle of a plague and in the anger of God against Israel, Phineas himself is an example of righteousness and the righteousness of the second generation. So, it is ending really badly for the first generation but positively for the second generation. His action completes that transition from the grumbling, rebellious generation. We are done with the old. It is now time for the new. The next chapter, Chapter 26, begins with the census of the second generation and that report that the first generation has died out, all but Joshua and Caleb and Moses, but he will also soon die. The period of the wilderness is over. It is now time to prepare to enter the land. So, most of this third section of Numbers, chapters 26-36 deals with laws for preparation to enter.

There is in this last section a narrative of one more battle. The second generation engages these treacherous Moabites and Midianites. And they achieve complete victory. The story of the battle also completes for us the story of Balaam with two brief passages. We finally get to see the state of his heart. Numbers 31:8 tells us, "They killed the kings of Midian along with the rest of their slain: Evi and Rekem and Zur and Hur and Reba, the five kings of Midian; they also killed Balaam the son of Beor with the sword." Balaam? What is he doing there? What is he doing still with Moab and Midian? Two more verses tell us, Numbers 31:15-16.

And Moses said to them, "Have you spared all the women? Behold, these caused the sons of Israel, through the counsel of Balaam, to trespass against the Lord in the matter of Peor, so the plague was among the congregation of the Lord."

This is the quality of biblical narrative. It has just been drawing out this idea of who is this Balaam. We have been set up all along to wonder about him. What kind of man is he? With whom does his allegiance truly lie? And we have been getting some mixed signals. Here we get final confirmation. Balaam's allegiance lies with Balaam. When he was fired by Balak, he said, "I will go but first I will advise you." And so, we see he did. He gave counsel. Balaam encouraged a friendly policy of interaction with Israel. Something like this, "Tempt them away from their God with your women and with feasts to the gods. That is the only way to bring wrath on Israel. Use sexuality to entice them into worship of your own gods. If you can do that God will punish them for you." And the plan almost worked.

Conclusion

The Balaam story is an intriguing example of prophecy. True prophecy may or may not come out of the faithfulness of a prophet's heart. The minimum requirement is a willingness to repeat the words that are given. We wonder if Balaam became a faithful believer in Yahweh. He obeys God. His words are sound. His ministry is sound. He gets results. So, we might be shocked by his end to see him with the enemy.

We are shocked when fruitful, biblical, skillful Christian evangelists and musicians and pastors have their hidden sin uncovered and revealed, when they commit adultery, when embezzle funds, when they walk away from Jesus. If we walk with God long enough, we learn that a man can be gifted by God without having a heart for God. He can be faithful in communicating the truth of God. He can even have a real impact on other people for the glory of God. People's lives can be changed. And yet, he himself not be right at all with God in his inner life. The gifted man may have accepted that there is real power and influence in communicating the words of God. He has figured out that is how you build a church or ministry or family. And yet, without letting it become apparent on the outside, he is really in it for himself. He is communicating the glories of God for his own glory. He may not even be able to fully admit that to anybody, his own motives having become so mixed up in his message. His own skillfulness and fruitfulness and honor in ministry have become his identity. It is ultimately about him, not about God. He is serving God. But he is not seeking to know God. He is seeking to gain the glory that the service brings. His self-glory comes by attaching himself to God's glory. Balaam was

spiritually gifted by God. He was given skill and insight. We don't know about his previous life. We don't get that story. But in this story, he is humbled by God, he repents, he speaks the truth. He is used by God. He communicates biblical truth, part of the Bible. He contributes to the Bible. By taking part in proclaiming the glory of God, he himself was glorified. Most men would have just spoken a curse and taken the gold. These men are even easier to understand, a true charlatan. Balaam is this more complex case of the man who truly is being used by God and maybe even truly believes in this message that he is telling other people. But internally, Jesus is not the bread of life. He is not feeding off of his relationship with God. He is feeding off of his own success and glory in ministry. It was never really about God for Balaam. Balaam was serving Balaam.

And so, Balaam's name has become associated with so-called believers who distort biblical truth to tempt the people of God into accepting societal norms of sexuality and idolatry that are in opposition to God. Balaam is known for his final counsel to Balak. This is how you ruin the people of God. You tempt them with the pleasures of society with the gods of society or at least with getting their vision of God to conform with society. John made this connection, writing in Revelation 2:14 to the church in Pergamum, he states, "But I have a few things against you, because you have there some who hold the teaching of Balaam, who kept teaching Balak to put a stumbling block before the sons of Israel, to eat things sacrificed to idols and to commit acts of immorality." Leaders who say that the church ought to conform to secular systems of belief and behavior in order to make the church attractive and relevant and prevent the loss of numbers, have fallen in line with the counsel of Balaam. They claim that the only way to keep the church alive is to become like the surrounding culture, to accept the surrounding values even if they are contrary to the out of date values of the Bible. And Balaam could tell them, "On the contrary, conforming to cultural norms of behavior and conforming to a cultural vision of God that is opposed to the biblical vision is actually the most sure way to kill your church. That's the advice I gave Balak. And it almost worked."

Reflection Questions

1. As you read the story of Balaam and the donkey in 22:1-35, what do you notice as interesting or important or strange or confusing? What questions come to mind?
2. What stands out to you to suggest that Balaam is a faithful follower of Yahweh? What suggests that he is not?
3. What do you think about the suggestion that in this story Moses intentionally leaves us to wonder about the state of Balaam's heart? Is that the correct way to read this story? Do you think the Bible is intentionally presenting us with a complex character who interacts with God, obeys God, speaks for God, yet does not really walk with God?
4. What stands out to you in the sin of Peor story in Numbers 25:1-17?
5. Why is God so angry with the people over their behavior? Can you align your heart with the anger of God? Do you feel why this is so detestable to God?
6. How does Phinehas stand out as a righteous man? Can you align your heart with approval for his actions? Or does he seem like a religious extremist to you? If you wanted to portray Phinehas negatively, how would you describe him and his actions? If you wanted to portray Phinehas positively, how would you describe him?
7. Were you surprised by Balaam's end in Numbers 31:8, 15-16? Why does the story set us up to be surprised?
8. Have you been hurt or shocked by the sin of a prominent Christian being revealed? How does Balaam help us to think about the complexity of spiritually gifted people who seemingly lead a God-honoring life, and then are revealed to have a dark side?
9. How does the Balaam story challenge you in your walk with God?

Lesson 23: Ancient Near East Literary Background to the Books of Moses

Introduction

In this lesson we are taking a short break from the Pentateuch to consider Ancient Near Eastern parallels to the Bible. This lesson pairs with lesson 8 Ancient Near Eastern Backgrounds. How do we think about stories or ideas or behaviors that are mirrored outside of the Bible in Egyptian or Babylonian or Hittite sources?

We have just finished our overview of Numbers, the fourth book in the Pentateuch. If you want to keep going with the Pentateuch, then feel free to skip this podcast and jump to the next lesson, which is the first lesson on Deuteronomy. If you have ever wondered what to do with multiple flood stories or similar law codes or biblical references to Leviathan, then this lesson is for you.

In 2300 BC, Sargon the Great established the rule of his city Akkad over all Mesopotamia. This Akkadian empire became the caretaker of Sumerian culture which had accumulated in the region for more than one thousand years. After 200 years of Akkadian rule, a devastating threat spilled over the Zagros mountains from the plateaus of modern-day Iran. Gutian barbarians swept through the land of two rivers. They brought no written language; no record of history. In what seems to be a historical pattern, the barbarian hordes overwhelmed Sumerian civilization.

The resurgence of Sumerian domination began in Lagash. Susan Bauer writes, “The warrior Gudea of Lagash rid his own city of Gutians, took Lagash’s reins as king, and then began to purify and rebuild the temples of the Sumerians, which had apparently been wrecked by the Akkadians or the Gutians.”¹¹ An inscription records Gudea’s narration of how he came to know how to rebuild a Sumerian temple for the god Ningirsu. Gudea says,

In the dream a man, whose stature reached up to heaven [and] reached down to earth, who according to the tiara around his head was a god...at whose feet was a storm, to whose right and left a lion was at rest, commanded me to build his house...a second [man], like a warrior...held in his hand a tablet of lapis-lazuli, [and] outlined the pattern of a temple.¹²

600 years before Moses received the tabernacle pattern from God amidst the storm on the mountain, Gudea, King of Lagash, received a temple pattern in a dream from his god, at whose feet was a storm. This story was recorded and has made its way down to us. Did it also make its way down to Moses? What do we make of this? Coincidence? Some parallels may be coincidence. Some parallels may only be apparent parallels, which, upon closer inspection, show up not actually to be that similar. But there are too many connection points between the Bible and Ancient Near Eastern sources to write off every case as accidental. We need to thoughtfully assess potential connections.

Assessing Parallels

Let’s start with potential ways to assess Ancient Near Eastern parallels, then we will look at some examples. I am heavily in debt to Dr. Jeffrey Niehaus, my Old Testament professor at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary. Dr. Niehaus became a believer in Jesus Christ the same month that he received his doctorate from Harvard University. He is a born-again believer whose critical thinking was developed in the secular university before being applied to the Bible. I have taken principles for assessing parallels from classes with Dr. Niehaus and from his book, *Ancient Near Eastern Themes in Biblical Theology*, which, by the way, is a great place to start if you would like to further investigate the issue of parallels.

First, let’s acknowledge a very widespread presupposition that exists in secular academia. It is generally assumed that human religion has evolved from a primitive state to an advanced state. Dr. Niehaus cites George Frazer’s classic anthology, *The Golden Bough* as an example. Frazer admitted that his thirteen-volume work was primarily a collection of data, but he added in his own interpretation of

¹¹ Susan Wise Bauer. *The History of the Ancient World*. (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2007) 123.

¹² Jeffrey J. Niehaus. *Ancient Near Eastern Themes in Biblical Theology*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 2008) 94-95.

the data. Niehaus writes, "Frazer detected a pattern in the evolution of human thought: from belief in magic through belief in religion to belief in science. He thought the pattern was universal."¹³

Though often skeptical or even hostile to the Bible, this presupposition that human religion has only moved from primitive to advanced can also have proponents who are socially conservative and generally positive toward the Bible. The Canadian psychologist Jordan Peterson advocates a worldview that originates with primitive man discovering moral values that promote human society. The display of commendable moral attributes are recorded in the stories of heroes. The heroes of those myths are later elevated to the status gods and goddesses. The commendable attributes are finally brought together from many gods to one supreme display of goodness in God the Father and the true god-man hero Jesus Christ. Jesus, then is the pinnacle of human thought on moral values that began with no gods and ended up with Jesus. That's my paraphrase of Peterson. He says it much, much better than I have here. The point I am drawing from Peterson, is that he does not believe religion to be based on historical events. He might call it truth, but he is talking about psychological truth. And in that, he is talking about his version of psychological truth which assumes evolutionary development of religion. He assumes a growth from the primitive to the advanced.

As a believer in the Bible, I automatically question this presupposition of religious evolution. I hold to a very different story. I hold to a story of devolution. Adam and Eve were created good, with advanced knowledge of one supreme Creator God. Humanity did not start with no knowledge of God and then move towards God. Humanity started with God and moved away from Him. Paul describes the human cycle of devolution this way in Romans 1:21-23,

²¹ For even though they knew God, they did not honor Him as God or give thanks, but they became futile in their speculations, and their foolish heart was darkened. ²² Professing to be wise, they became fools, ²³ and exchanged the glory of the incorruptible God for an image in the form of corruptible man and of birds and four-footed animals and crawling creatures.

The Bible recognizes this tension in people. While we yearn for what we can only find in God, we resist submission to God, turning away to shadows.

This is Europe. This is modern America. We are moving from a past general acceptance in our cultures of one true creator God towards paganism, towards a belief in a world of spirits. And it's not evolution, it's devolution. The New Atheists think that by eliminating the god of Islam, the god of Judaism, and especially the God of Christianity, they will usher humanity into a more evolved state free of religion, free of spirit, free of heaven and hell, and free of an imposed moral standard. But looking at our recent human past, we ask, "Is that the result in communist Russia during the 20th century? You officially remove God. Is he gone? Is that what is happening now in communist China? Is that the path modern Europeans and Americans are taking?" When you remove God, does humanity embrace a purely materialistic vision of the world? No. Some might. But on the whole, we are still seeking the spiritual and the spirits. How do we interpret that? How do we understand that? We are either still caught in our primitive human state, not yet evolved enough to accept there is no god or eternity cries out in our hearts, drawing us inevitably to the belief that there must be something more, and if God be removed, we will find something to put in his place.

Even if we do not accept the story of the Bible, we still have some challenging sociological data to consider. For example, if you have never read Don Richardson's, *Eternity in their Hearts*, that is another intriguing place to start. Richardson notes culture after culture that recognizes a distant creator god, too holy to approach, existing in the far-off past. Did humankind really evolve religion through time? Is that the best interpretation of the data? Or is it possible that we began with knowledge of God and have cycled through the generations sometimes coming closer to worship of the one true God, sometimes turning away to develop our own vision of spiritual reality?

¹³ Niehaus, 16.

So, while recognizing that for non-Christian scholars, it is a possible hypothesis that the Bible took from some other culture and built upon what it borrowed, that is not our presupposition. It is a possibility that must be addressed, but there are other possibilities to consider. As with most serious endeavors in life, understanding parallels between the Bible and Ancient Near Eastern culture is not so simple as to have a one-size-fits all answer. We have to consider possible parallels on a case by case basis and consider different possible reasons for those parallels. Coming from my presupposition that the Bible is God's Word and does provide us with an accurate world-view, I suggest four possibilities to keep in mind when considering parallels between the biblical story and various Ancient Near Eastern sources.

1. There exists a common source event from which both the Bible and other sources draw.
2. God is intentionally using a known element of culture to communicate spiritual truth.
3. God is rebuking or correcting false elements of the Ancient Near Eastern worldview.
4. Spiritual forces of evil have worked to pervert God's truth.

Now, let's consider some examples for each of these four possibilities, starting with the first possibility that there exists a common source event.

Examples of Parallels

1. *There exists a common source event from which both the Bible and other sources draw.*

Possibly the most famous example of parallels was discovered in 1827 by a 27-year-old Englishman named George Smith who taught himself how to read cuneiform script and the Assyrian language. Browsing the British Museum in his free time, Smith was the first to read and understand portions of the now famous *Gilgamesh Epic* which provides parallels both to the biblical creation story and the flood story. Let's consider the flood.

The most complete standard version of the *Gilgamesh Epic* comes from Assyria and is dated somewhere from 1300 to 1000 BC. That would be after Moses wrote down the story of Noah, according to our dating of Moses around 1500 BC. But the oldest tablets recording part of the *Gilgamesh Epic* stretch back before Moses to 1700 BC and are thought to represent a story written around 2100 BC, taking us back to the Empire of Ur in Abraham's era. So, it seems to be a flood story that predates the writing of Genesis by about 600 years.

This example becomes more interesting by the existence of other flood narratives from the same region of the world. There are five total. The biblical story and the *Gilgamesh Epic* are two. There is an older Sumerian story that has been dated before 3000 BC called *Eridu Genesis* as well as the later Akkadian *Atrahasis Epic* from around 1600 BC and the Ugaritic *Ras Shamra* version from around 1400 BC. All of these epics are from the region stretching from Israel up North to the source of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers curving east down to the Persian Gulf. It's what we call Mesopotamia.

How do we assess these parallel flood stories? Is it a coincidence that every major culture in Mesopotamia seems to have its own flood story? Is it a myth that got copied? Once we get past the similarities in the stories, there are some striking differences. For example, in both the *Gilgamesh Epic* and in the Noah story, the heroes make sacrifice after exiting the boat. In the *Gilgamesh Epic* the gods are compared, not very flatteringly, to flies buzzing over the sacrifice, eager to eat after having gone long without food. There is an interesting connection to Genesis 8:21, which states,

²¹ The LORD smelled the soothing aroma; and the LORD said to Himself, "I will never again curse the ground on account of man, for the intent of man's heart is evil from his youth; and I will never again destroy every living thing, as I have done."

In the biblical account the Lord does smell the soothing aroma of the sacrifice. But unlike *Gilgamesh*, instead of indicating hunger, this implies God's reception of the sacrifice from Noah. Sacrifice is pleasing to the God of the Bible when it comes from obedience and a right heart. The Bible never depicts God as needing sustenance from sacrifice. The motive of the story is similarly connected.

None of the other stories establish the motive for the flood as judgment on mankind for wicked behavior. In the *Atrahasis Epic*, the god Enlil decides to destroy mankind because they are making so much noise he cannot sleep. So, while we have a definite parallel in some aspects of the story, the biblical story also stands out as theologically unique.

So, how do we explain the parallels. Well, in the case of the flood, one very reasonable possibility is that there was a flood. There exists a common source event from which both the Bible and other sources draw. That may not be the only possible explanation, but it is a good explanation which takes into account the number of different stories. Paul Kriwaczek, who is not sympathetic towards the Bible acknowledges in his work *Babylon: Mesopotamia and the Birth of Civilization* that non-Christian scholars also suggest that a real flood event stands behind the various sources, though they posit a regional catastrophe such as a possible flooding of the Black Sea basin or a re-flooding of the Persian Gulf rather than a world-wide flood.¹⁴ Still, it is an interesting acknowledgement that the stories are not simply fiction but best explained by a real event.

The conversation does not tend to end with suggesting a reason for the parallels. We then want to know which of the stories, if any, comes closest to an actual flood event.

Scholars with a bias towards the evolution of religious thought might argue that the biblical story is shown to be the youngest version based on its higher theological development. That does not necessarily follow. It is possible that we have progress of thought, it is also possible that we have devolved to a lower state of thought. As we quoted from Paul above, knowledge of God may have been lost in this case. In a more recent example, consider Renaissance architects who glorified the great structures of Rome but did not know how to build them. That knowledge was lost. One hundred years into the building of the cathedral in Florence, the technical know-how to complete the dome without buttresses was still not available, they didn't know how to do that, even though that kind of dome existed in Rome. They could see it; they couldn't reproduce it. Not until Brunelleschi finally figured out the mathematics for the Roman Parthenon, regaining the knowledge that had been lost for over 1000 years and finished the cathedral. We might agree that the biblical flood story shows advanced theological knowledge but that does not help us conclude whether it came before or after the more primitive stories. The biblical flood story could have existed 1000 years before the *Gilgamesh Epic*, and yet have been lost to the otherwise advanced Sumerian and Assyrian cultures.

There is reason to believe that the biblical story and the *Gilgamesh Epic* are the older two out of these five. Gilgamesh and the Bible share 17 story elements, which include...

| Story Element | Gilgamesh Epic | Atrahasis Epic | Eridu Genesis | Ras Shamra | Biblical Account |
|---------------------------------------|----------------|----------------|---------------|------------|------------------|
| 1. Divine decision to destroy mankind | Present | Present | Present | Present | 6:6-7 |
| 2. Warning to a flood hero | Present | Present | Present | Present | 6:13 |
| 3. Command to build an ark | Present | Present | | | 6:14-21 |
| 4. Hero's obedience | Present | Present | | | 6:22 |
| 5. Command to enter | Present | | | | 7:1-3 |
| 6. Entry | Present | Present | | | 7:7-16a |
| 7. Closing the door | Present | Present | | | 7:16b |
| 8. Description of the flood | Present | Present | Present | | 7:17-21 |
| 9. Destruction of life | Present | Present | | | 7:22-23 |
| 10. End of rain | Present | | Present | | 8:2-3 |
| 11. Ark grounding on a mountain | Present | | | | 8:4 |

¹⁴ Paul Kriwaczek. *Babylon: Mesopotamia and the Birth of Civilization* (New York: Thomas Dunne Books, 2012) 67.

| | | | | | |
|--------------------------------------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|
| 12. Hero opening a window | Present | | Present | | 8:6 |
| 13. Birds sent out in reconnaissance | Present | | | | 8:7-12 |
| 14. Exit from the Ark | Present | Present | | | 8:15-19 |
| 15. Sacrifice | Present | Present | Present | | 8:20 |
| 16. Divine smelling of sacrifice | Present | Present | | | 8:21-22 |
| 17. Blessing on the flood hero | Present | | Present | Present | 9:1-17 |

All of those elements exist in the same order in Gilgamesh and in the Bible, in Genesis 6-9. The other three narratives contain only some of these elements, interestingly, they all keep the same order, suggesting that there was an original telling of the story that these tales draw upon. Was it Gilgamesh or Moses or an older lost text? We simply do not know what kind of textual material Moses might have had to work with. There is no way to prove which story came first. We can say that nothing about the available data makes it unreasonable to believe that the biblical story is communicating an ancient retelling of an actual event.

Let's move on to a second reason for the existence of parallels between the Bible and Ancient Near Eastern sources. In some cases, God is intentionally using a known element in culture to communicate spiritual truth.

2. God is intentionally using a known element of culture to communicate spiritual truth.

In this series on the Pentateuch, I have referenced several times a parallel between the 2nd Millennium Suzerain-Vassal treaty form and the form of covenant we find in the Bible. That form includes the seven elements of (1) Title, (2) Historical Prologue, (3) Stipulations, both general and specific, (4) deposition and regular reading, (5) Witnesses, (6) Blessings, and (7) Curses. The elements are less distinctive in the covenants with Adam and Noah and more apparent with Abraham and Moses. This makes sense considering that the covenants made with Abraham and Moses both occurred when the 2nd Millennium versions were being used in the ancient cultures.

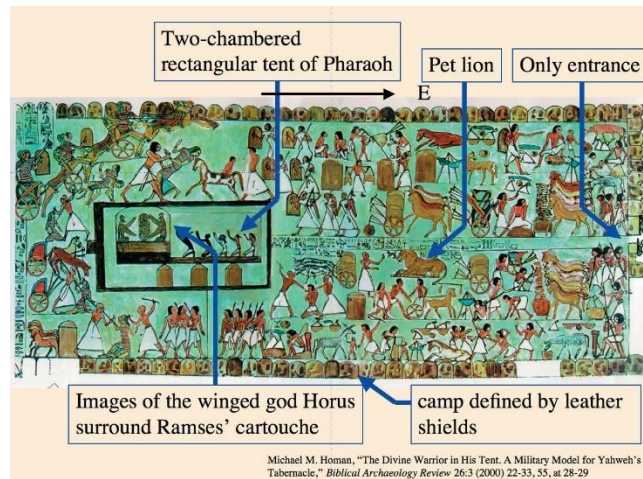
I will not give examples of the treaty text here. You can look back at lesson 4 on Abraham and lesson 6 on Isaac and Jacob for examples from Ancient Near Eastern kings. And you can go to lesson 11 to see the parallel example in Exodus at Mt. Sinai. When we get to Deuteronomy, I will show how the seven elements of the 2nd Millennium Suzerain-Vassal treaty form are most clearly seen in that renewal of covenant with the second generation out of Egypt. It really shows up in Deuteronomy.

The parallels are present. The question arises as how to explain those parallels. I believe that God intentionally uses known cultural elements to communicate truth to his people. God intentionally cut covenant with Abraham in Genesis 15 using a form Abraham would recognize. God intentionally patterned his communication of covenant in Exodus and again in Deuteronomy, according to an already known form.

Why would God do that? Why would God not be more original? Well, because God is a great communicator. When Jesus chose to explain spiritual truth through parables, he used what was known – flowers in a field, lost sheep, a farmer sowing seed – to communicate powerful truths that were not readily known. Jesus set up context through that which was commonly known in order to shake up his listeners up with some twist or some surprise that revealed something they did not know.

When God cut covenant with Abraham it all made sense to Abraham. He could understand what God was doing, at least until, the smoke and fire passed through the cut sacrifice of covenant. That part would have blown his mind. That made no sense. The great king, the suzerain, never walks through the covenant pieces. It seems as though God is communicating, "If you break covenant with me, let me be cut in two, let me die." But how can that be? How can my king who is holy die for me? What is this? It is great communication, that's what it is. God takes what is known to communicate his radical grace; to communicate what is not known.

To take a second example, the tabernacle pattern does not stand out as a radically different temple pattern. Scholars have noticed a striking resemblance between the tabernacle of Israel and the war camp of Ramses II. In a relief taken from an Egyptian temple, the war camp is marked out in a rectangle, like the outer curtains of the tabernacle. Inside the war camp is a second rectangle, the tent of Ramses, which is divided into two-chambers, bearing resemblance to the tabernacle's holy place and holy of holies. The inner chamber of Ramses' tent is depicted with images of the winged god Horus. Pharaoh understands himself to be the incarnation of Horus. He is a god, and he makes his dwelling in the inner most place. God himself also makes his presence to dwell in the tabernacle's innermost holy of holies.



Again, we are left wondering how do we assess these similarities? Did Moses just copy some Ancient Near Eastern pattern? Why would God use a known pattern for his tabernacle instead of presenting Moses with a completely unique vision? And again, I would say that God does so because he is an excellent communicator, and he is also aware of the difficulty his people have in absorbing radically new information. They have to have some context. One thing at a time is going to be enough. The tabernacle pattern, though bearing similarity to other Ancient Near Eastern temple forms, teaches a number of spiritual truths to the Israelites, but none more than the one most important truth. And it is a radical truth. The tabernacle was beautiful, all gold and blue and scarlet, filled with light, and smelling of incense. It was a special place. But in some sense, it was a known kind of place. It looked like what an Ancient Near Eastern person might expect of a mobile temple. Approaching the tabernacle, a person might be impressed, but not confused. At least, not until they would enter in. At that moment any Ancient Near Eastern man or woman would be baffled. They would immediately notice the absence of the most important element of a temple. What do you think they would have noticed? What was missing from all the furnishings that God gave Moses to create for his tabernacle? What was not there? There was no idol and that means no god. The Hebrew word for temple is e-gal. That is an ancient Sumerian word adopted by the Hebrew language. It simply means big house. The whole point of a temple is that it is a house for a god. And everyone knows that gods and goddesses dwell on earth as idols. The idol is the god. And the temple is his house. It makes no sense to have a house with no God.

The Israelites, themselves, recognized this potential oversight, even before Moses came down from Mt. Sinai with the tabernacle pattern, they formed a golden calf so that god might dwell with them in his tent. They fixed what God was leaving out. A central truth God was communicating through the tabernacle was that he would dwell among the Israelites but not as an idol. He is a completely different king of God. God rejected that theology. At times, God communicates the unknown, the radically different, by using the known and giving it a twist. This is our second reason for parallels between the Bible and Ancient Near Eastern culture.

Another reason for parallels is that God is rebuking or correcting false elements of the Ancient Near Eastern worldview.

3. God is rebuking or correcting false elements of the Ancient Near Eastern worldview.

In places the biblical text connects with ideas from other ancient texts. For example, the *Enuma Elish* Babylonian creation myth, which may reflect a story dating back to the Old Babylonian Empire of 1800-1500 BC, tells of the battle between the goddess Tiamat and the god Marduk. Tiamat becomes a sea dragon embodying the Ancient Near Eastern link between the sea and chaos. Marduk wins the

battle, killing Tiamat. He cuts her in two, making the sky out of one half of her body and the earth out of the other half. Marduk puts likenesses of gods in the heavens as the sun and stars, creates day and night and places other likenesses of gods on the earth, presumably these are idols.

When you know Genesis chapter 1 and then read Enuma Elish connection points between the two stories jump out. In the end, the differences between the two stories provide the key take away. Tiamat embodies chaos represented by the sea. God's spirit hovers over the waters of chaos, which are formless and void. God then brings order out of that chaos. Marduk creates something out of something, out of the body of Tiamat. God creates something out of nothing. The stars in the sky are images of the gods in the heavens for Marduk. But God calls light out of the darkness by his word and fixes physical stars in the heavens. Marduk places gods on earth in the form of idols. God creates man on earth to reflect his image.

I think it is saying too much to assert that Genesis 1 is an apologetic against false Ancient Near Eastern beliefs about creation. God and his creation, particularly his creation of man, both male and female, are the center of the story. God is creating an environment for his vassal king and queen who will reign as his stewards on earth. God's creation of man and woman is at the forefront of the story. The refutation of false myth is in the background. The Ancient Near Eastern context does not dominate God's communication, but it's part of God's communication. The truths presented in Genesis 1 communicate to the Ancient Near Eastern culture but also more broadly. These truths help establish an accurate worldview, speaking to every generation. God exists apart from the universe. That was important then, that's important now. All things have been created by his word. Important then – important now. All things were created good. Important then – important now. Evil would come later through beings originally created good. Important then – important now. And every human being has inherent dignity and worth, being created in the image of God. Important then – very important now. These truths challenge both the Ancient Near Eastern worldview detected in the background of the story while continuing to challenge modern pagan and modern secular worldviews.

We should expect to come across parallels between Ancient Near Eastern ideas and biblical ideas. Biblical events and teaching occur in historical time and place, within culture. When we see potential parallels, we should stop and consider, what the biblical text is communicating. Is this a rebuke or a correction of a contrary worldview? What is the Bible saying to culture? When we read about Leviathan in Isaiah 27:1, we should not immediately assume that Isaiah believes in a god or monster called Leviathan. We should assume that the great poet-prophet has chosen his words carefully and is intentionally making a reference to known mythology. It is not always clear how to interpret such references, though I think we should give God and the writers of Scripture considerable credit in their knowledge of the false belief systems of their day and in their ability to relevantly address those false beliefs with truth.

Let's consider one last possible cause of parallels. Spiritual forces of evil have worked to pervert God's truth.

4. Spiritual forces of evil have worked to pervert God's truth.

Here is a test question for you after our study of Leviticus. Which festival required the following burnt offering: one bull, seven lambs, one goat, bread and wine? What do you think it is? Passover? Tabernacles? You know of course it's a trick question. The answer is a 2nd millennium Hittite festival. Here is one more. Which festival required the following burnt offering: one bull, seven lambs, two rams, bread and wine? That one is the Feast of Weeks described in Leviticus 23:18-19. There is no significant difference between the two.

How do we assess parallels between religious practices in the Bible and in the Ancient Near East? Sacrifice of lambs and grain were received by God from the very beginning of fallen human experience as recorded in the story of Cain and Abel. In that story Cain's sacrifice is not acceptable to God because Cain's heart is not a right heart of worship. God warns Cain that sin is crouching at the door. Cain does not take responsibility for his own internal problem, but similarly to how his father

Adam blamed Eve, Cain blames his brother Abel. Cain turns from God, murders Abel, and is cast out. When we reject true worship and turn from God, what are we turning to? When humankind turns away from true sacrifice that has a true heart of worship, what else is out there?

In Deuteronomy 32:16-19 we read this regarding Israel's participation in Moabite ritual at Peor:

- | | |
|---|---|
| ¹⁶ "They made Him jealous with strange gods; | With abominations they provoked Him to anger. |
| ¹⁷ "They sacrificed to demons who were not God,
New gods who came lately, | To gods whom they have not known,
Whom your fathers did not dread. |
| ¹⁸ "You neglected the Rock who begot you, | And forgot the God who gave you birth. |
| ¹⁹ "The LORD saw this, and spurned them | Because of the provocation of His sons and daughters. |

In the New Testament, Paul also recognizes demonic activity as a part of false religious practices. He writes in 1 Corinthians 10:20, "No, but I say that the things which the Gentiles sacrifice, they sacrifice to demons and not to God; and I do not want you to become sharers in demons."

In Romans 1:21-23, we read Paul's view on human responsibility for false worship. When human beings turn away from the glory of God and begin to worship created things, whether idols of men and animals or relationships, careers, money, the horoscope, Paul describes that turn from God as having a further effect on the person. Turning from God leads to a further darkening of the mind and heart. In 1 Corinthians 10:20, Paul is adding that turning from God to false worship is not only a human activity, but also involves the activity of fallen angels, demons. False religion is created both by fallen human beings and by spiritual forces of evil. Both bear responsibility.

Satan works to destroy what God has made, to wreck his glory. Humanity is Satan's number one target. A major strategy to further devastation among men is the promotion of false religion of all kinds. Satan takes what is true and perverts it to feed the human drive for control, for identity, for pleasure, and for worship. We should not be surprised at parallels to biblical worship and ritual. We should not be surprised to see that which God reveals taken and deformed, perverting the truth of who God really is and perverting the way of life that truly honors him. We should not be surprised if we believe in spiritual warfare and the reality of evil spiritual forces.

So, what do we make of Gudea of Lagash receiving a temple pattern in a dream from his god? Is that a purely psychological event? I don't think so. I think we recognize a perversion of the truth. The writer of Hebrews affirms in 8:2 that the true temple is a heavenly reality. That is God's true dwelling place. God handed down to Moses a pattern that symbolized deeper truth. The story of Gudea acknowledges that physical temple is meant to be a pattern of heavenly temple. The pattern must come from heaven. But in the case of Gudea the story is a demonic perversion of this principle, there is a handing down a false pattern of worship and behavior.

Dr. Niehaus has pointed out an overarching pattern in the pantheons of Ancient Near Eastern cultures. It is a pattern that mimics the real and the true. In the pattern, each system of gods and goddesses has a far-off, supreme, creator god. In Mesopotamia the supreme god was An, in Canaan El, in Greece Chronos, in Rome Saturn. This was not the god one typically dealt with. Usually, one of his sons, the storm god, took the throne and became the focus of the pantheon. In Mesopotamia this was Enlil, in Canaan Baal, in Greece Zeus, and in Rome Jupiter. Surrounding this storm god, as his court or as his rivals was a divine assembly of other gods and goddesses. Below this divine assembly are human beings.

| Mesopotamia | Canaan | Greece | Rome |
|-------------------|------------------|-----------------------|----------------------|
| An (supreme god) | El (supreme god) | Chronos (supreme god) | Saturn (supreme god) |
| Enlil (storm god) | Baal (storm god) | Zeus (storm god) | Jupiter (storm god) |
| Divine Assembly | Divine Assembly | Divine Assembly | Divine Assembly |
| Humans | Humans | Humans | Humans |

Biblical view

The Father (supreme God)
The Son (also God, of course, appearing in storm theophany)
Angelic assembly (e.g. Job 1-2)
Humans¹⁵

This pattern mimics spiritual reality. It's not completely false. It's based on a true pattern. There is a supreme creator, God the Father. Though he does not remain far off and aloof. He has made himself accessible, and he has not been deposed by his Son. The Son is Jesus Christ. He is also connected with the storm. In his vision in 7:13, Daniel says, "And behold, with the clouds of heaven one like a Son of Man was coming." Jesus, himself, says of his return in Matthew 24:30,

³⁰ And then the sign of the Son of Man will appear in the sky, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the SON OF MAN COMING ON THE CLOUDS OF THE SKY with power and great glory.

But Jesus is more than a storm god. Jesus is one with the Father. He is God. The Divine Assembly is not a host of gods and goddesses but a host of angels, created beings. And instead of idols reflecting the image of God on earth, God the Father has created men and women to reflect his image.

The biblical worldview is not an evolution of religion mutating out of pagan religion or primitive thought. The pagan worldview is a devolution of religion that comes about both by human beings turning away from God and by Satan working to spur on that separation and perversion.

Conclusion

Parallels between biblical thought and Ancient Near Eastern thought should not surprise us. If the Bible is what it claims to be then we should expect parallels with surrounding cultures. There are some excellent scholarly resources that present factual evidence of parallels and contact points between the Bible and other cultures. Those can be very helpful. They're very interesting. At the same time, when reading these resources, Christians need to use their mind, to remain alert and thoughtful when those scholars stop simply providing the data and start interpreting that data. When you encounter scholarly interpretation, you need to ask, "What presuppositions is this scholar depending on to guide their own assessment of the data?" We have discussed three presuppositions to keep in mind. (1) First, is the scholar assuming an evolution of religion or do they remain open to the idea of devolution, that in the history of human thought there has at times been significant loss of knowledge. We do not assume perpetual progress. (2) Second, is the scholar assuming that the oldest dateable occurrence of a story is in fact the oldest version of the story or do they remain open to the fact that we do not have access to all the information regarding when a story was first composed. For example, we cannot date Moses' writing of the Pentateuch before 1500 BC, but we also do not know what sources he may have been working from. Those sources could have been much older. They are lost to us, and we have to admit that. We just don't have all the data. (3) Third, does the scholar dismiss immediately the supernatural and spiritual. We addressed this common presupposition in Lesson 8. A thinking Christian cannot dismiss the supernatural, since the biblical worldview asserts that God is and that God acts in history. An atheist is acting consistently on his worldview if he rejects the spiritual. We just need to be aware of the presupposition the scholar is working from.

¹⁵ Niehaus, 180.

After considering the presuppositions of scholarly interpretations, we should try to read first-hand accounts of the parallels, so that we not only get a feel for what is similar, but also recognize the differences, in truth similarities are often fairly superficial and the differences are crucial. That's the key. For example, some scholars have made a lot of the Baal cycle as a source for the Christian idea of resurrection. But the more you study the Ancient Near Eastern account, the more you marvel that the Bible could ever come up with its view of the afterlife based on the cycle of Baal. Baal being taken down to the underworld every year and then brought back from the dead by his sister-lover provides a mythical explanation of the seasons. The rains cease when the storm god is taken down to the underworld and resume when he is set free. But as far as any connection to biblical resurrection, the differences are so striking there is no real similarity. It's a completely different worldview. They are different ideas.

So, in assessing parallels, first, we need to check the presuppositions of any proposed interpretation. Second, we need to consider the data closely, so that we see for ourselves the similarities and differences. And then third, we need to consider four possible reasons for the parallels. (1) Is there a common source event explaining similar stories? (2) Is God intentionally using cultural practices and ideas to communicate his truth? (3) Is God rebuking or correcting false cultural ideas? (4) Could demonic perversion of true worship and practice be involved?

May God bless you in your study of his word as you commit to loving him with all your soul, with all your heart, and also with all your mind. To God be the glory!

Reflection Questions

1. a. If you have never considered Ancient Near Eastern parallels to the biblical text, how does it make you feel to think that ancient Mesopotamian culture produced stories of the creation, the flood and dreams about temple patterns, required similar rituals and laws, and promoted similar spiritual concepts about the gods and the afterlife? Does that intrigue you or make you uncomfortable? What is your emotional response?
- b. If you have already considered Ancient Near Eastern parallels to the biblical text, can you think of past conversations about those parallels? How did you feel? Did you ever feel threatened or confused? Why do you think you felt that way?
2. If the biblical story is true, should we expect other worldviews in various cultures to parallel or contain overlap with the Bible or not? What would you expect to find?
3. How would you describe the difference between the evolution of religion and the devolution of religion? How might someone describe religion as having evolved over time, moving from a more primitive state to a more advanced state? How might someone argue that religion has devolved over time, moving from advanced to primitive?
4. Which of these four recommendations for assessing parallels seems particularly helpful to you? Can you think of an example conversation where one or more of these might help you communicate your belief? Do you see any problems with these considerations? Would you add a fifth possibility for parallels?
 1. There exists a common source event from which both the Bible and other sources draw.
 2. God is intentionally using a known element of culture to communicate spiritual truth.
 3. God is rebuking or correcting false elements of the Ancient Near Eastern worldview.
 4. Spiritual forces of evil have worked to pervert God's truth.
5. Below is a translation of the flood story from Gilgamesh. Make a first quick read through of the story. As you read, note some things that stand out to you as similar to the biblical story and some things that stand out to you as different from the biblical story? How do the four recommended considerations for assessment help you think about this parallel to the biblical story?

The Gilgamesh Epic, Tablet XI, The Story of the Flood

<http://www.ancienttexts.org/library/mesopotamian/gilgamesh/tab11.htm>

Gilgamesh spoke to Utanapishtim, the Faraway:

"I have been looking at you,
but your appearance is not strange--you are like me!
You yourself are not different--you are like me!
My mind was resolved to fight with you,
(but instead?) my arm lies useless over you.
Tell me, how is it that you stand in the Assembly of the Gods, and have found life!"

Utanapishtim spoke to Gilgamesh, saying:

"I will reveal to you, Gilgamesh, a thing that is hidden,
a secret of the gods I will tell you!
Shuruppak, a city that you surely know,
situated on the banks of the Euphrates,
that city was very old, and there were gods inside it.
The hearts of the Great Gods moved them to inflict the Flood.
Their Father Anu uttered the oath (of secrecy),
Valiant Enlil was their Adviser,
Ninurta was their Chamberlain,
Ennugi was their Minister of Canals.
Ea, the Clever Prince(?), was under oath with them
so he repeated their talk to the reed house:

'Reed house, reed house! Wall, wall!

O man of Shuruppak, son of Ubartutu:

Tear down the house and build a boat!
Abandon wealth and seek living beings!
Spurn possessions and keep alive living beings!
Make all living beings go up into the boat.
The boat which you are to build,
its dimensions must measure equal to each other:
its length must correspond to its width.
Roof it over like the Apsu.

I understood and spoke to my lord, Ea:

'My lord, thus is the command which you have uttered
I will heed and will do it.
But what shall I answer the city, the populace, and the Elders!'

Ea spoke, commanding me, his servant:

'You, well then, this is what you must say to them:
"It appears that Enlil is rejecting me
so I cannot reside in your city (?),
nor set foot on Enlil's earth.
I will go down to the Apsu to live with my lord, Ea,
and upon you he will rain down abundance,
a profusion of fowl, myriad(!) fishes.
He will bring to you a harvest of wealth,
in the morning he will let loaves of bread shower down,
and in the evening a rain of wheat!"'

Just as dawn began to glow
the land assembled around me-

the carpenter carried his hatchet,
 the reed worker carried his (flattening) stone,
 ... the men ...
 The child carried the pitch,
 the weak brought whatever else was needed.
 On the fifth day I laid out her exterior.
 It was a field in area,
 its walls were each 10 times 12 cubits in height,
 the sides of its top were of equal length, 10 times 12 cubits each.
 I laid out its (interior) structure and drew a picture of it (?).
 I provided it with six decks,
 thus dividing it into seven (levels).
 The inside of it I divided into nine (compartments).
 I drove plugs (to keep out) water in its middle part.
 I saw to the punting poles and laid in what was necessary.
 Three times 3,600 (units) of raw bitumen I poured into the bitumen kiln,
 three times 3,600 (units of) pitch ...into it,
 there were three times 3,600 porters of casks who carried (vegetable) oil,
 apart from the 3,600 (units of) oil which they consumed (!)
 and two times 3,600 (units of) oil which the boatman stored away.
 I butchered oxen for the meat(!),
 and day upon day I slaughtered sheep.
 I gave the workmen(?) ale, beer, oil, and wine, as if it were river water,
 so they could make a party like the New Year's Festival.
 ... and I set my hand to the oiling(!).
 The boat was finished by sunset.
 The launching was very difficult.
 They had to keep carrying a runway of poles front to back,
 until two-thirds of it had gone into the water(?).
 Whatever I had I loaded on it:
 whatever silver I had I loaded on it,
 whatever gold I had I loaded on it.
 All the living beings that I had I loaded on it,
 I had all my kith and kin go up into the boat,
 all the beasts and animals of the field and the craftsmen I had go up.
 Shamash had set a stated time:
 'In the morning I will let loaves of bread shower down,
 and in the evening a rain of wheat!
 Go inside the boat, seal the entry!'
 That stated time had arrived.
 In the morning he let loaves of bread shower down,
 and in the evening a rain of wheat.
 I watched the appearance of the weather--
 the weather was frightful to behold!
 I went into the boat and sealed the entry.
 For the caulking of the boat, to Puzuramurri, the boatman,
 I gave the palace together with its contents.
 Just as dawn began to glow
 there arose from the horizon a black cloud.
 Adad rumbled inside of it,
 before him went Shullat and Hanish,

heralds going over mountain and land.
Erragal pulled out the mooring poles,
forth went Ninurta and made the dikes overflow.
The Anunnaki lifted up the torches,
setting the land ablaze with their flare.
Stunned shock over Adad's deeds overtook the heavens,
and turned to blackness all that had been light.
The... land shattered like a... pot.
All day long the South Wind blew ...,
blowing fast, submerging the mountain in water,
overwhelming the people like an attack.
No one could see his fellow,
they could not recognize each other in the torrent.
The gods were frightened by the Flood,
and retreated, ascending to the heaven of Anu.
The gods were cowering like dogs, crouching by the outer wall.
Ishtar shrieked like a woman in childbirth,
the sweet-voiced Mistress of the Gods wailed:
'The olden days have alas turned to clay,
because I said evil things in the Assembly of the Gods!
How could I say evil things in the Assembly of the Gods,
ordering a catastrophe to destroy my people!!
No sooner have I given birth to my dear people
than they fill the sea like so many fish!'
The gods--those of the Anunnaki--were weeping with her,
the gods humbly sat weeping, sobbing with grief(?),
their lips burning, parched with thirst.
Six days and seven nights
came the wind and flood, the storm flattening the land.
When the seventh day arrived, the storm was pounding,
the flood was a war--struggling with itself like a woman writhing (in labor).
The sea calmed, fell still, the whirlwind (and) flood stopped up.
I looked around all day long--quiet had set in
and all the human beings had turned to clay!
The terrain was as flat as a roof.
I opened a vent and fresh air (daylight!) fell upon the side of my nose.
I fell to my knees and sat weeping,
tears streaming down the side of my nose.
I looked around for coastlines in the expanse of the sea,
and at twelve leagues there emerged a region (of land).
On Mt. Nimush the boat lodged firm,
Mt. Nimush held the boat, allowing no sway.
One day and a second Mt. Nimush held the boat, allowing no sway.
A third day, a fourth, Mt. Nimush held the boat, allowing no sway.
A fifth day, a sixth, Mt. Nimush held the boat, allowing no sway.
When a seventh day arrived
I sent forth a dove and released it.
The dove went off, but came back to me;
no perch was visible so it circled back to me.
I sent forth a swallow and released it.
The swallow went off, but came back to me;

no perch was visible so it circled back to me.
I sent forth a raven and released it.
The raven went off, and saw the waters slither back.
It eats, it scratches, it bobs, but does not circle back to me.
Then I sent out everything in all directions and sacrificed (a sheep).
I offered incense in front of the mountain-ziggurat.
Seven and seven cult vessels I put in place,
and (into the fire) underneath (or: into their bowls) I poured reeds, cedar, and myrtle.
The gods smelled the savor,
the gods smelled the sweet savor,
and collected like flies over a (sheep) sacrifice.
Just then Beletili arrived.
She lifted up the large flies (beads) which Anu had made for his enjoyment(!):
'You gods, as surely as I shall not forget this lapis lazuli around my neck,
may I be mindful of these days, and never forget them!
The gods may come to the incense offering,
but Enlil may not come to the incense offering,
because without considering he brought about the Flood
and consigned my people to annihilation.'
Just then Enlil arrived.
He saw the boat and became furious,
he was filled with rage at the Igigi gods:
'Where did a living being escape?
No man was to survive the annihilation!'
Ninurta spoke to Valiant Enlil, saying:
'Who else but Ea could devise such a thing?
It is Ea who knows every machination!'
La spoke to Valiant Enlil, saying:
'It is yours, O Valiant One, who is the Sage of the Gods.
How, how could you bring about a Flood without consideration
Charge the violation to the violator,
charge the offense to the offender,
but be compassionate lest (mankind) be cut off,
be patient lest they be killed.
Instead of your bringing on the Flood,
would that a lion had appeared to diminish the people!
Instead of your bringing on the Flood,
would that a wolf had appeared to diminish the people!
Instead of your bringing on the Flood,
would that famine had occurred to slay the land!
Instead of your bringing on the Flood,
would that (Pestilent) Erra had appeared to ravage the land!
It was not I who revealed the secret of the Great Gods,
I (only) made a dream appear to Atrahasis, and (thus) he heard the secret of the gods.
Now then! The deliberation should be about him!'
Enlil went up inside the boat
and, grasping my hand, made me go up.
He had my wife go up and kneel by my side.
He touched our forehead and, standing between us, he blessed us:
'Previously Utanapishtim was a human being.
But now let Utanapishtim and his wife become like us, the gods!

Let Utanapishtim reside far away, at the Mouth of the Rivers.'
They took us far away and settled us at the Mouth of the Rivers."

"Now then, who will convene the gods on your behalf,
that you may find the life that you are seeking!

Wait! You must not lie down for six days and seven nights."
soon as he sat down (with his head) between his legs
sleep, like a fog, blew upon him.

Utanapishtim said to his wife:

"Look there! The man, the youth who wanted (eternal) life!
Sleep, like a fog, blew over him."

his wife said to Utanapishtim the Faraway:

"Touch him, let the man awaken.

Let him return safely by the way he came.

Let him return to his land by the gate through which he left."

Utanapishtim said to his wife:

"Mankind is deceptive, and will deceive you.

Come, bake leaves for him and keep setting them by his head
and draw on the wall each day that he lay down."

She baked his leaves and placed them by his head
and marked on the wall the day that he lay down.

The first loaf was dessicated,
the second stale, the third moist(?), the fourth turned white, its ...,
the fifth sprouted gray (mold), the sixth is still fresh.
the seventh--suddenly he touched him and the man awoke.

Gilgamesh said to Utanapishtim:

"The very moment sleep was pouring over me
you touched me and alerted me!"

Utanapishtim spoke to Gilgamesh, saying:

"Look over here, Gilgamesh, count your loaves!

You should be aware of what is marked on the wall!

Your first loaf is dessicated,

the second stale, the third moist, your fourth turned white, its ...
the fifth sprouted gray (mold), the sixth is still fresh.

The seventh--suddenly he touched him and the man awoke.

Gilgamesh said to Utanapishtim:

"The very moment sleep was pouring over me
you touched me and alerted me!"

Utanapishtim spoke to Gilgamesh, saying:

"Look over here, Gilgamesh, count your leaves!

You should be aware of what is marked on the wall!

Your first loaf is dessicated,

the second stale, the third moist, your fourth turned white, its ...
the fifth sprouted gray (mold), the sixth is still fresh.

The seventh--at that instant you awoke!"

Gilgamesh said to Utanapishtim the Faraway:

"O woe! What shall I do, Utanapishtim, where shall I go!

The Snatcher has taken hold of my flesh,

in my bedroom Death dwells,

and wherever I set foot there too is Death!"

Home Empty-Handed

Utanapishtim said to Urshanabi, the ferryman:

"May the harbor reject you, may the ferry landing reject you!
May you who used to walk its shores be denied its shores!
The man in front of whom you walk, matted hair chains his body,
animal skins have ruined his beautiful skin.
Take him away, Urshanabi, bring him to the washing place.
Let him wash his matted hair in water like ellu.
Let him cast away his animal skin and have the sea carry it off,
let his body be moistened with fine oil,
let the wrap around his head be made new,
let him wear royal robes worthy of him!
Until he goes off to his city,
until he sets off on his way,
let his royal robe not become spotted, let it be perfectly new!"

Urshanabi took him away and brought him to the washing place.

He washed his matted hair with water like ellu.

He cast off his animal skin and the sea carried it off.

He moistened his body with fine oil,

and made a new wrap for his head.

He put on a royal robe worthy of him.

Until he went away to his city,

until he set off on his way,

his royal robe remained unspotted, it was perfectly clean.

Gilgamesh and Urshanabi bearded the boat,

they cast off the magillu-boat, and sailed away.

The wife of Utanapishtim the Faraway said to him:

"Gilgamesh came here exhausted and worn out.

What can you give him so that he can return to his land (with honor) !"

Then Gilgamesh raised a punting pole

and drew the boat to shore.

Utanapishtim spoke to Gilgamesh, saying:

"Gilgamesh, you came here exhausted and worn out.

What can I give you so you can return to your land?

I will disclose to you a thing that is hidden, Gilgamesh,

a... I will tell you.

There is a plant... like a boxthorn,

whose thorns will prick your hand like a rose.

If your hands reach that plant you will become a young man again."

Hearing this, Gilgamesh opened a conduit(!) (to the Apsu)

and attached heavy stones to his feet.

They dragged him down, to the Apsu they pulled him.

He took the plant, though it pricked his hand,

and cut the heavy stones from his feet,

letting the waves(?) throw him onto its shores.

Gilgamesh spoke to Urshanabi, the ferryman, saying:

"Urshanabi, this plant is a plant against decay(!)

by which a man can attain his survival(!).

I will bring it to Uruk-Haven,

and have an old man eat the plant to test it.

The plant's name is 'The Old Man Becomes a Young Man.'"

Then I will eat it and return to the condition of my youth."
At twenty leagues they broke for some food,
at thirty leagues they stopped for the night.
Seeing a spring and how cool its waters were,
Gilgamesh went down and was bathing in the water.
A snake smelled the fragrance of the plant,
silently came up and carried off the plant.
While going back it sloughed off its casing.'
At that point Gilgamesh sat down, weeping,
his tears streaming over the side of his nose.
"Counsel me, O ferryman Urshanabi!
For whom have my arms labored, Urshanabi!
For whom has my heart's blood roiled!
I have not secured any good deed for myself,
but done a good deed for the 'lion of the ground'!"
Now the high waters are coursing twenty leagues distant,'
as I was opening the conduit(?) I turned my equipment over into it (!).
What can I find (to serve) as a marker(?) for me!
I will turn back (from the journey by sea) and leave the boat by the shore!"
At twenty leagues they broke for some food,
at thirty leagues they stopped for the night.
They arrived in Uruk-Haven.
Gilgamesh said to Urshanabi, the ferryman:
"Go up, Urshanabi, onto the wall of Uruk and walk around.
Examine its foundation, inspect its brickwork thoroughly--
is not (even the core of) the brick structure of kiln-fired brick,
and did not the Seven Sages themselves lay out its plan!
One league city, one league palm gardens, one league lowlands, the open area(?) of the Ishtar Temple,
three leagues and the open area(?) of Uruk it encloses.

Lesson 24: Deuteronomy Form and Structure

Introduction

We have come to the last book of the Jewish Torah, Deuteronomy. And I realize that I have not talked about the titles of the books. I mentioned that the word Torah, which usually gets translated as Law in the New Testament, is the Hebrew term for the books of Moses, though it is more than law in the narrow sense of dos and don'ts. It is law in the broader sense of covenant and instruction. We have also been using the term Pentateuch for Torah. Penta means five in Greek, as in pentagon. And teuchos is the word for scroll. So, Pentateuch simply means five-scroll work.

The English titles for the books of the Pentateuch come from the Greek Septuagint (LXX). These titles were probably given around 250 BC when the Torah portion of the Septuagint was translated from the Hebrew text by Jewish scholars into a Greek version. And these Greek titles are a little more descriptive than the Hebrew titles. The Hebrew names for the books stick very close to the text, using the first significant word of each book as a title. The book of Genesis in the Hebrew is simply titled with a word that means "In the beginning." The book of Exodus is titled "Names." The book of Leviticus is titled "Called." The book of Numbers is titled "In the desert." And Deuteronomy is titled "Words." And the titles do not make sense until you look at the first few words of each book and then you see that the title is simply the first significant word that occurs. And in a sense are not really titles. They are references to the initial words of the text.

English takes its titles from the more descriptive Greek titles. Genesis comes from the Greek word for creation. Exodus, in Greek, means "the way out." Leviticus means "having to do with the duties of the Levites." Numbers is the one book where the Greek did not stick. Instead of the Greek word for numbers "Arithmoi," which you can hear sounds like arithmetic, English scholars went with the English word Numbers instead. And finally, we have Deuteronomy, which is literally translated "second law" but probably means "repeated law."

So, what is Deuteronomy? How ought we think about this final book of Moses? Does the title help or is it misleading?

"Second law" or "repeated law" are not bad titles for this fifth book of Moses, if we understand what that means from our study of the book itself. It is good to recognize that we have some repetition of the law code given from the previous books, particularly in Exodus at Mount Sinai. And it is good to recognize that this law code is being given to the second generation of Israelites out of Egypt. It is a second giving of law. But we need to define more precisely the relationship between the first law given at Mt Sinai and this second law code given on the plains of Moses. How do these two codes or covenants relate to one another?

I am going to start our interpretation of Deuteronomy where I usually start. I am starting with the structure of the book.

Determining the Literary Structure of Deuteronomy

Traditional scholarship recognizes in Deuteronomy a series of speeches by Moses. The Bible Project video overview on Deuteronomy, which you can check out on youtube or at observetheword.com, takes this approach, calling Deuteronomy one long speech by Moses to the people of Israel. Recent scholarship has also suggested that interpreters consider the presence of suzerain-vassal covenant features in Deuteronomy. And we have to take into account the presence of chiasm in Deuteronomy. We are going to consider all three approaches, taking three passes through the entire book, starting with the speeches of Moses.

1. The Speeches of Moses (Literary Style of Deuteronomy)

For each approach to the structure of Deuteronomy I'll give you one scholarly resource. Gleason Archer in his book *A survey of Old Testament Introduction* published in 1996 outlines Deuteronomy in six parts, according to the traditional speeches approach. The first three sections are called the first, second, and third discourse of Moses. The last three sections are the song of Moses, the final charge

and farewell, and the death of Moses. I'll include the outline in the notes at observetheword.com if you want to check out where the breaks are in the text.¹⁶

Recognizing that Deuteronomy is delivered in a series of speeches from Moses directed to this second generation of Israelites out of Egypt helps us get a feel for the book. The voice of the book is technically third person narrative. A narrator tells us in chapter 1:5, "Across the Jordan in the land of Moab, Moses undertook to expound this law, saying ..." That's 3rd person. The author, Moses himself in this case, is speaking about Moses, telling us what Moses said. But not much of Deuteronomy is narration. The narration leads quickly into sections where Moses is speaking, giving us a series of really long quotes. In those quotes, which make up most of the book, Moses is speaking in first person directly to the Israelites. So, here is an example of how this works in 1:5-6, "Moses undertook to expound this law, saying, 'The Lord our God spoke to us at Horeb, saying, "You have stayed long enough at this mountain. Turn and set your journey, and go to the hill country of the Amorites..."'" Those words of Moses start in verse 6, that's where he begins to say, "The Lord our God spoke to us at Horeb," and they continue all the way to chapter 4 verse 40. And that's one long quote. There are 5 verses of narration at the beginning of chapter 1 before we get into the quote and 9 verses of narration at the end of chapter 4 after we finish the quote. But in between those few verses of narration there are 147 verses of speech. In all of that text Moses is speaking in first person to the Israelites. He said, "the LORD spoke to us." Or, for example, he says in 1:9, "I spoke to you at that time..." The "I" is Moses and the "you" are the Israelites. Most of Deuteronomy is in this first person voice of Moses speaking to the people.

The second discourse is even longer and with less narration. After chapter 4, Moses resumes speaking in 5:1. And just the first half of the verse is narration. "Then Moses summoned all Israel and said to them, 'Hear, O Israel the statutes and the ordinances which I am speaking today in your hearing, that you may learn them and observe them carefully.'" This speech continues for 22 chapters, without stopping. That's a really long quote. It goes all the way to the end of chapter 26. And in all of that text Moses is speaking as the "I," I Moses am speaking to "you" Israel.

The third discourse picks up in 27:1, "Then Moses and the elders of Israel charged the people, saying, 'Keep all the commandments which I command you today.'" Archer has this discourse running from chapter 27 through chapter 31. This section, however, is not one long quote, but a series of speeches set side-by-side. There is a little narration through the text indicating each new beginning of a speech. So, along with the first beginning of the speech in 27:1, we also have:

In 27:9, "Then Moses and the Levitical priests spoke to all Israel, saying ..."

In 27:11, "Moses also charged the people on that day, saying ..."

In 29:1-2, "These are the words of the covenant which the LORD commanded Moses to make with the sons of Israel in the land of Moab, besides the covenant which He had made with them at Horeb. And Moses summoned all Israel and said to them ..."

In 31:1-2, "So Moses went and spoke these words to all Israel. And he said to them, ..."

In 31:7 "Then Moses called to Joshua and said to him in sight of all Israel, ..."

In 31:9-10 "So Moses wrote this law and gave it to the priests, the sons of Levi who carried the ark of the covenant of the LORD, and to all the elders of Israel. Then Moses commanded them ..."

¹⁶ I. First discourse: historical prologue, 1:1–4:49
II. Second discourse: laws by which Israel is to live, 5:1–26:19
III. Third discourse: warning and prediction, 27:1–31:30
IV. Song of Moses: Israel's responsibility to the covenant, 32:1–43
V. Final charge and farewell, 32:44–33:29
VI. Death of Moses and his obituary, 34:1–12

This third discourse section is different from the first two discourse sections in that it is not just one long speech, but it is this series of about seven speeches linked together. Though, it is similar to those sections in that the great majority of the text is a record of Moses speaking to the Israelites.

The next two sections, in chapter 32 and 33, consist of a poem each. Both are preceded with narration that tells us these poems were delivered verbally by Moses to the people of Israel. So, even with the poetry, we still have speech that is going on from Moses to the people.

The last verse of chapter 31, sets up the poem of chapter 32 this way, “Then Moses spoke in the hearing of all the assembly of Israel the words of this song, until they were complete.”

And the first two verses of chapter 33 set up the second poem this way, “Now this is the blessing with which Moses the man of God blessed the sons of Israel before his death. And he said, ...”

The last section in Archer’s six-part outline is not a discourse, but the narrative at the end of Deuteronomy that tells us about the death of Moses.

While we are here at the end of the book, I’ll point out a couple of ways the end ties together, not just Deuteronomy, but the whole of the Pentateuch. The ending of this fifth book is similar to the ending of our first book. Genesis ended with blessing the tribes of Israel by Jacob and then a brief narration of the death of Joseph. Deuteronomy ends in this second poem with a blessing of the tribes of Israel and then a brief narration of the death of Moses. There is also a key word link between the beginning of Genesis and the end of Deuteronomy. The word *hover* appears only twice in the Pentateuch. The first time is in Genesis 1:2 where the text says that the “Spirit of God was hovering over the waters.” The second use is here at the end of the Pentateuch in 32:11 where Moses likens God to an eagle “that hovers over his young.” These little artistic details speak to the unity and common authorship of the whole work by the author Moses.

Taking this quick view of Deuteronomy as a series of speeches by Moses, we pick up on the tone of the book as a call of obedience from old, faithful Moses. His time has come. He is about to die. His whole generation has passed. So, he takes the opportunity to speak to this next generation. We will hear repeated by Moses the phrase, “Hear O Israel.” He is not calling them merely to let sound waves bounce off their eardrums. He is calling them to listen with the intent of doing. Hear and understand and do. We also see in the discourse a heartfelt plea from Moses to obey as an act of love for God. Moses does not envision an imposed religion, weighing down the Israelites as an unwanted duty. Moses calls for obedience as a response of love from the heart. The Bible project sums up Deuteronomy as a repeated call from Moses to his people to listen, that is to listen, hear and obey, and to love. That’s the charge he leaves with them with.

Recognizing Deuteronomy as this series of speeches helps us get the voice and tone of the book. This is personal. It is first person from the heart of Moses to the people. Seeing the discourse shows us something that is going on in the text. It is the literary approach or style of the book. It does not, however, help us establish the literary structure of the text. More is going on in Deuteronomy than the speeches. So, let’s move on to consider the suzerain-vassal treaty form which is also a literary aspect of Deuteronomy.

2. 2nd Millennial Suzerain-Vassal Treaty (Literary Form of Deuteronomy)

Peter Craigie addresses the treaty form in *The New International Commentary on the Old Testament* volume on Deuteronomy which came out in 1976. This was one of the first scholarly, evangelical commentaries to evaluate Deuteronomy in light of the mound of archaeological examples of ancient near-eastern covenants uncovered through the 20th century. Critical scholars view the mix of literature in Deuteronomy as evidence that the book was stitched together from various sources by various authors. They argue that the mix of history and legal stipulations, blessings and curses, theological reflection and poetry in Deuteronomy cannot be explained if there was only one original author. They argue that no known form of literature can account for all these disparate genres found in this one book. That observation was true, that we did not have another similar example of

literature as the mix in Deuteronomy, at least, it was a true observation until the archaeology finds of the 20th century revealed numerous examples of suzerain-vassal treaties that contained exactly this mix of genres. Not only does the treaty form affirm what believers of biblical authority already accept, that Deuteronomy is a unified literary work from Moses, but more importantly the form helps us to better interpret the text we have in Deuteronomy by helping us understand the function of the different parts and how those different parts relate to one another.

As a reminder from our earlier lessons, the 2nd millennial suzerain vassal treaty form contains these standard elements.

- 1 Title
- 2 Historical Prologue
- 3 Stipulations
 - a. basic
 - b. detailed
- 4 Deposition and regular reading
- 5 Witnesses
- 6 Blessings
- 7 Curses

Deuteronomy includes all seven of these elements. I am not claiming that Deuteronomy is a suzerain-vassal treaty. Deuteronomy is a much higher literary accomplishment than what you would find in an ancient treaty document. An ancient near eastern listener would have recognized these covenant elements while also recognizing that they were receiving something much more than just a legal document. Moses builds in explanation and exhortation in a wonderful literary design on top of the covenant form.

Let's go through the covenant elements and point them out as they occur in Deuteronomy. I also notice that I am using the words treaty and covenant interchangeable. That's because the scholarly work done on the ancient texts often uses of the word treaty whereas in the biblical context, we use the word covenant. So, just know that treaty means covenant and covenant means treaty. It is the same thing.

1 Title (1:6; 5:2)

Ancient covenants started with a title through which the suzerain or great king declared how he was to be addressed, extolling himself with magnificent characteristics and claims of authority. The lack of a title at the beginning of Deuteronomy is a reminder that we are not dealing with a strict legal document. Deuteronomy is unique as a literary work. It does not strictly follow a covenant, legal form. We do get a title. We get it both at the beginning of the historical prologue and at the beginning of the basic stipulations. Moses does not provide a grandiose title though it is grand. He simply states in 1:6, "The LORD our God spoke to us at Horeb..." (Horeb is another word for Sinai) and in 5:2, "The LORD our God made a covenant with us at Horeb." The LORD our God. Yahweh, our Elohim.

These names have become loaded with meaning for us since we began at Genesis 1, beginning with the creation story in the first chapters of Genesis, moving through the fall and the call of Abraham to the call of Moses and the Exodus from Egypt. God keeps building on the revelation of his name. He does this in direct confrontation with Pharaoh in the book of Exodus, Pharaoh who claimed a great title for himself and admitted to having no knowledge of Yahweh and no desire for knowledge of Yahweh. The most important theme of the whole Pentateuch is the answer to the question, "Who is our God?" He is creator. He is holy. He the self-existent I Am. He is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, full of lovingkindness and truth. He is the God whose anger burns against sin and will not let unrighteousness go unpunished. And he is also the God who makes a way for sinful people to enter into his love. He is the God of Israel and he is the God of all nations. He is Yahweh, our Elohim.

2 Historical Prologue (1-3)

In chapters 1-3, Moses provides a historical prologue. He starts with the setting forth from Sinai, repeating the promise of land from the southern end of Canaan all the way up north to the Euphrates river. Moses reaches back in history to remind his listeners that this is the promise given to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Moses reminds Israel that they have received a land grant from the great king. Now they must go take it. The first generation failed to act in faith on this promise from God. That generation has passed away in the wilderness wandering. The second generation is now camped in the plains of Moab on the wrong side of the Jordan river. They must decide whether or not they will be the faithful generation, to take God at his word, believe in the promise, and enter that land.

Interestingly, in this historical prologue Moses does not focus on the Exodus out of Egypt even though that is the decisive historical moment of salvation that Israel will look back to every year, every time they celebrate the Passover, every time they celebrate the Feast of Booths, they are looking back to the Exodus. And we will focus on the Exodus and on Mt. Sinai in chapters 4-11 but not here in the historical prologue. Here Moses gives attention to the victory over the Amorite kings Sihon and Og. It is much less amazing, much less incredible. Why does he do that?

The purpose of historical prologue is to define or reflect on the relationship between the great king and his vassal people. In this historical reflection, Moses does take Israel back to Abraham and to Sinai. They do need to consider the big picture. They also need to consider how their own generation fits into that picture. I think Moses recognizes the need every generation has for their own experience with God. We need to understand that we fit into a past context, but we cannot live in the past. I think about that sometimes in relation to my own denomination that I grew up in. We are quite proud of our missionary history. We have great history. And I love it. I love recalling it, and I love retelling it. But then I have to ask, "What is our present experience?" How has our generation experienced God? And are we still the same people? Are we still committed to the authority of God's Word and the gospel of Jesus Christ? Do we have our own stories of faithfulness, of proclamation, of supernatural victory? Are we seeing communities and peoples come to Christ through the work of God by the labor of our generation? It might not be as fantastic as the Exodus out of Egypt, not much is. But do we have our Sihon and Og? Do we have our more present victories and present experience with God as we faithfully follow him?

Moses reminds this second generation of Israelites of the work that God has just done among them. They do need to remember the Exodus. They also need to experience their own stories of "God with us." The defeat of Sihon and Og, that is not their parents' story. That is their story. But they are not to rest on those two victories. There is still more work to do. They still need to cross the Jordan river. Moses is saying, "Look at what God has promised our fathers. And look at what God has just done for us and through us. Let's not forget our purpose and settle down here. Keep it going. The mission is still ahead of you. It is not your father's calling. It is yours. God is at work among you. Keep going!"

This historical prologue connects this generation of Israel to the bigger historical story going back hundreds of years to the promises of Abraham, while also reminding them of their own recent, personal history with God.

3 Stipulations (5:6-21; 12:1-26:19)

After the historical prologue, Moses goes over the covenant stipulations. Chapters 4-11 reflect on covenant obedience with an emphasis on the ten commandments. These are the basic commands of the mosaic covenant. We then dive into a large section of legal code starting in 12:1 and continuing all the way through the end of chapter 26. These are detailed covenant stipulations of Deuteronomy. Alright, where are we? So far, we have covered the first three elements of the suzerain-vassal treaty form in correct order: the title, the historical prologue, and the stipulations. The remaining elements are also there. They are just not in order.

7 Curses and 6 Blessings (27:15-26; 28:3-14)

So, after the list of detailed stipulations, we have a list of covenant curses in 27:15-26, followed by a list of covenant blessings in 28:3-14. We will consider these more closely later. For now, we recognize that the giving of specific blessings and curses follows the covenant form that the Israelites would expect.

4 Regular reading and Deposition (31:10; 31:26)

A specific command for regular reading is given in 31:10,

At the end of every seven years, at the time of the year of remission of debts, at the Feast of Booths, when all Israel comes to appear before the LORD your God at the place which he will choose, you shall read this law in the front of all Israel in their hearing.

This does not mean to imply that the Israelites are only to read Deuteronomy once every seven years. In 6:6-7 Moses says,

“These words, which I am commanding you today, shall be on your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your sons and shall talk of them when you sit in your house and when you walk by the way and when you lie down and when you rise up.”

And a special command is given to the king in 17:18-19.

Now it shall come about when he sits on the throne of his kingdom, he shall write for himself a copy of this law on a scroll in the presence of the Levitical priests. It shall be with him and he shall read it all the days of his life, that he may learn to fear the Lord his God, by carefully observing all the words of this law and these statutes,

In the most fundamental building block of society, the family, parents are to read the Torah, to know the Torah, and to teach it to their children. Also, at the highest level of society, the king is to write out for himself a copy of the law. This is not the work of a scribe. He doesn't get to farm it out. He is supposed to do it himself. He is to have his own personally written out scroll. And it is to be written with the oversight or witness of the Levitical priests to ensure the integrity of the written word. The king is to know this law, to read it, so that he can observe it all the days of his life.

So, the commanded reading of once every seven years is not the way the people learn the words of Torah. That begins in the home and is a commitment of every level of leader from parent to king. The communal reading of the law is a ceremonial affirmation by the whole community of the centrality of this law to all belief and order in Jewish society.

Moses also commands the deposition of this law in 31:26, saying, “Take this book of the law and place it beside the ark of the covenant of the LORD your God that it may remain there as a witness against you.” Apparently, the original scrolls of Torah were not kept inside the ark of the covenant but beside the ark of the covenant. The stone tablets containing the ten commandments were kept in the ark as representative of the whole covenant.

The scrolls kept by the ark of the covenant in the holy of holies would not have been the only copies. For instance, we have already read, the King was to make his own copy to have in his possession so that he could read and study and obey.

5 Witnesses (30:19 and 32:1)

Now, we have not seen a call to witnesses in our major covenants so far from Adam to Noah to Abraham to Moses at Sinai. We do not expect to see a call to witnesses in the Bible, like we see in other ancient covenants, because those witnesses were always a myriad of gods and goddesses called to witness to covenant between king and vassal. The one true God is his own witness. There are no gods and goddesses to call. So, it is interesting here in Deuteronomy that God goes ahead and fills out anyway the all the expected elements of covenant form by calling witnesses. We just read that the words of the law are themselves a witness. But heaven and earth are also symbolically called as witnesses. We see this in 30:19,

I call heaven and earth to witness against you today, that I have set before you life and death, the blessing and the curse. So choose life in order that you may live, you and your descendants by loving the LORD your God, by obeying his voice, and by holding fast to Him.

The call of witnesses is repeated at the beginning of the poem in 32:1, "Give ear, O heavens, and let me speak; and let the earth hear the words of my mouth."

So, we see that God through Moses intentionally included all the elements of an ancient near eastern suzerain-vassal treaty form in the book of Deuteronomy. Recognition of the form helps us to understand various literary elements that make up Deuteronomy. The structure of the book, however, does not follow a treaty form. So, we haven't yet figured out our structure. It is not based on the discourses. It is not based on the treaty form. So, let's move on to one more literary feature of the book, chiasm.

3. Chiasm (*Literary Structure of Deuteronomy*)

Duane Christensen addresses in depth the chiastic structure of Deuteronomy in the *Word Biblical Commentary* of Deuteronomy published in 2002.¹⁷ Recognizing a five-part chiastic structure has enabled me personally to really get my hands around this complex book. And we have talked about chiasm a lot throughout this series, but I'll repeat the definition for anyone who may be jumping into these lessons right here at the beginning of Deuteronomy. Chiasm is one of the parallel structures loved by the writers of both Old and New Testament. Western education heavily focuses on linear outlines. We do everything in order. Westerners are taught to structure everything as I, II, III, IV with linear subheadings. So, we might have IA. IB. IC. IIA. IIB. III. IVA. IVB. IVC. and so on. Everything moves in a straight line. This is not true for a lot of non-Western peoples. And it certainly wasn't true of the writers of Bible.

In a chiastic structure, the first element parallels the last element, the second element parallels the second to last element, the third element parallels the third to last element, and so on, sometimes with a central element that is not paired, but not always. John F. Kennedy left us with a famous chiasm. It is very simple.

A "Ask not what your country can do
B for you –
B ask what you
A' can do for your country,"

So, the pattern is your country, you, you, your country. So, your country is paralleled on the outside frames, the beginning and the end, and you is the parallel on the inside frames.

How does this pattern work as an overall structure of Deuteronomy? As we have already stated, one of the things you notice when reading through Deuteronomy is a movement from one type of literature to another. When you start reading Deuteronomy, you are reading historical narrative. But then in chapter 4, the reading gets more difficult. It is not narrative anymore. You have just moved into theological exhortation. It is like the difference when listening to a preacher when he moves from giving theological explanation to telling a supporting story or illustration. The story is a lot easier to listen to and to follow. We love stories. We follow narrative naturally. It seems like our brains are wired for it. But theological explanation is harder to get our minds around. It is harder to

¹⁷ Along with the five-part chiasm recommended here, Christensen points out a possible seven-part "menorah pattern" observed by C. J. Labuschagne by dividing B and B' one more time.

A Opening narrative: Moses looks backward Deut 1–3
B Opening prophetic sermon Deut 4
C The Horeb covenant Deut 5–11
X The lawcode: statutes and stipulations Deut 12–26
C' The Moab covenant Deut 27–29
B' Concluding prophetic sermon Deut 30
A' Concluding narrative: Moses looks forward Deut 31–34¹⁷

follow. We notice another big change after the theological exhortation in chapter 12. All of the sudden, we find ourselves in the middle of legal code. And that runs for 15 chapters. But then we find ourselves back in theological exhortation, and we finally end back in narrative.

Simplified five-part chiasm

| | |
|----------------------------|-------|
| A Historical Prologue | 1-3 |
| B Theological Exhortation | 4-11 |
| X Covenant stipulations | 12-26 |
| B' Theological Exhortation | 27-30 |
| A' Historic transition | 31-34 |

These different genres in Deuteronomy form a simple chiastic pattern. We start and end with historical narrative. That is the A and A' of our outline. It is the outer frame. A is chapters 1-3 at the beginning. This is our historical prologue, explaining how we have gotten this generation to the plains of Moab on the wrong side of the Jordan river. At the end of Deuteronomy, we have A'. That is chapters 31-34, which are also historical narrative but not giving us more prologue. A' is describing the historical transition from first generation to second generation, from Moses to Joshua.

One of the interesting features of chiasm is that you can read the two parallel sections back to back, and the text makes complete sense. So, if you want to take an easy beginning approach to Deuteronomy, just read the beginning and end. Read chapters 1-3 and then skip to the end and read 31-34 as though these chapters are all one story. And you will not feel like you missed anything in the narrative. It just continues on smoothly. And you get a good overview of the story of Deuteronomy. You will also notice some repetition of ideas that tie the two sections together. For example, A and A' both refer to the fact that Moses has been told he cannot enter the promise land. At the beginning, in chapter 3, Moses mentions that the people share some blame for this, but in chapter 32, God lays the blame squarely on Moses.

The second two parallel sections are theological exhortation and explanation. B is chapters 4-11 and B' is 27-30. Both sections have as a main theme the call to listen and love. B develops that theme of listen and love with a focus on the ten commandments and what should be learned from the period of wandering in the desert. B' develops the theme of listen and love while addressing the tension between blessing and curse, life and death, obedience and disobedience.

You can follow the same suggestion as with A and A' by studying section B, chapters 4-11, and then skipping the middle part of Deuteronomy to pick up at B' in chapter 27. The text flows quite naturally from the end of 11 which has a command to declare blessing and curse on Mount Gerizim and Mount Ebal to the beginning of 27 which starts with the same command about blessing and curse on Gerizim and Ebal. It is as though you have not missed anything. The narrative picks right back up, though there is added information. We get the actual curses and blessings that are to be proclaimed. These parallel sections both issue a call to obedience as central to life for Israel and both include reference to the great commandment. In section B we have the Shema, the central prayer of Judaism, in Deuteronomy 6:4-5,

Hear, O Israel! The Lord is our God, the Lord is one! You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.

But then in B', in Deuteronomy 30:6, Moses repeats the command, telling about a new work God will do some time in the future,

Moreover the Lord your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your descendants, to love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, so that you may live.

If you really want to get into the thought of Deuteronomy, I suggest taking one of these two sections to study. Section B, chapters 4-11, is 8 chapters long. That is a significant amount of theological exhortation to chew on. When we try to study all of a book, it can be too much at once. If you really

want to get Deuteronomy, you will need to divide and conquer. Start with a smaller section to study, then give yourself a break. So, chapters 4-11 is a great place to start. We will focus on this section in our next lesson.

Now to section x, the central section. I like labeling central sections of chiasm that have no corresponding parallel section with an x. In Deuteronomy, chapters 12-26 are our x, the center of the structure. And with the constant call to listen and love, we need to know exactly what it is we are supposed to listen to. What are the specific commands? How are we to obey? A and A' provide the historical context and situation. B and B' exhort us and provide explanation on how we are to think about law and obedience and relationship with God. X, the central section, gives us specific practical commands to follow.

Conclusion

We have addressed three different literary features of Deuteronomy. And we have gone through the book quickly three times. And here is my recommendation, putting all this together, on how to view the book. The literary device of chiasm creates a structure for the book that helps us to see how the different parts fit together. The beginning and end are historical narrative, the two parts of the inner frame provide us with theological exhortation to examine. And the central section adds to the law code of Israel, furthering our understanding of God's civil, ceremonial, and moral expectations for his people. Now, as we study through Deuteronomy, we are going to see that inside of these sections we have more chiasm. Chiasm is a significant structural device for Deuteronomy.

Adding to the chiastic structure, we recognize that the form of the Deuteronomy is ancient near eastern treaty. Interestingly, the treaty form used is not from the first millennium. From the time of King David on, near eastern treaties uncovered by archaeology contained a significantly reduced set of only four elements: only title, witnesses, stipulations, and curses. The three elements that dropped out were historical prologue, a command for regular reading and deposition and blessing. It does not speak to relationship. It does not care whether you read it. It does not offer any positive incentive. So, this first millennium form is not a very nice covenant form. And it is not the form we see in the Bible. Why is that significant? Well one reason it is significant is that scholars critical of the Bible and of Mosaic authorship claim that Deuteronomy was written much later than the book itself claims. Instead of coming at the beginning of Israel's history and prophesying Israel's failure to be true to God, leading to eventual exile, critical scholars claim that Deuteronomy was written around the time of the curse, the time of exile. That is much later. That is around 600 BC. So, it is not a prophecy but an explanation. If all of this critical scholarship which argues this really late date of Deuteronomy is true, then the authors of Deuteronomy accomplished an amazing feat of historical fiction by writing Deuteronomy according to a form that had not been in use for hundreds of years. The bias of critical scholars against potential prophecy really comes out in this late dating of Deuteronomy. Deuteronomy fits the 2nd millennium. The background of Deuteronomy is a 2nd millennial suzerain-vassal treaty. We have no real reason to believe that it wasn't written then. It really seems to be showing a presupposition of critical scholars that you cannot have prophecy. And since Deuteronomy speaks of a future king of Israel before a time of kingship, and since Deuteronomy speaks even further down the line to exile, critical scholarship starts with this assumption, it must have been written later and then they try to argue from there why they believe it was written latter. They are predisposed to their own argument. But if we drop out that presupposition that prophecy can't happen and we look at the form of Deuteronomy, then we have to be honest – it fits the 2nd millennium. It is using a 2nd millennium suzerain-vassal form.

More importantly for us who already accept Moses as the author, the 2nd millennium suzerain-vassal form helps us to recognize the literary form that Moses was using. And so, we can interpret better what we see in Deuteronomy. For example, we should understand the blessing and curse sections as part of a covenant between a great king and a vassal people. The blessings are not absolute promises for every individual member of the community. The laws of compassion in other parts of the law for

those who are poor or sick presuppose that even when the nation is under a period of blessing, individuals in the community may still suffer hardship. You will still have the poor and sick with you. The blessings are given to the community as a whole and will be the experience of faithful members of the community, but the promise of blessings does not preclude the reality of suffering even among the faithful. This is a serious interpretive mistake made by the prosperity gospel when interpreting wrongly the promises of blessing and curse, because they don't understand them as part of a suzerain-vassal covenant. Looking at a blind man, Jesus' disciples asked, "Who sinned, was it this man or his parents?", Jesus answered, "Neither, but it was that the works of God might be displayed in him." Suffering is not always the result of a lack of faith in the promises of God. We may be involved in a plan that God is working out. That is the whole story of Job. Blessing and curse are not strict formulas applied to faith and obedience, but the promise of God for the whole community in light of ongoing covenant obedience or disobedience. This is just one example of how we need to understand these elements of covenant in their own covenant context in order to rightly interpret theme.

Recognizing that Deuteronomy is describing the making of a covenant also challenges us to consider how this covenant relates to the covenant cut at Mt. Sinai. Way back in lesson 6 on Isaac and Jacob, I quoted from the prologue of a 2nd millennium treaty between the Hittite suzerain Mursilis and his vassal Duppi-Tessub of Amurru. Duppi-Tessub's father had died, and so, the great king Mursilis invited the new vassal king Duppi-Tessub to renew covenant. Back in that lesson, I taught that we should view the covenant of Isaac and Jacob as renewal of the covenant with Abraham. Since then, I have read a distinction made by my seminary professor Dr. Niehaus. He would say that Isaac and Jacob did not renew covenant but reconfirmed covenant. And I think he is right. I think this is a helpful distinction. Isaac and Jacob recommitted themselves to the covenant made with Abraham without adding new stipulations to the covenant and without going through a required ceremony of cutting covenant.

Dr. Niehaus points out two covenant renewal ceremonies in Scripture. Noah was instructed to renew the common grace covenant between God and all mankind after the flood. This was a renewal of the adamic covenant which included additional stipulations, listed in Genesis 9, and required a new cutting of covenant ceremony. And there was even a new sign of the rainbow. The second example of covenant renewal in the Bible is here in Deuteronomy. This covenant is not separate from the covenant made to Israel at Sinai, but it is also more than a repetition or a recommitment to that covenant. There are some new stipulations here that were not given to the previous generation. And there is the requirement of a special cutting ceremony. This cutting ceremonial does not happen on the plains of Moab. It is going to happen once they go into the land. But God uses already here the language of cutting covenant in Deuteronomy 29:1 when he says, "These are the words of the covenant which the LORD commanded Moses to make (that is, in Hebrew, "to cut") with the sons of Israel in the land of Moab." So, we have here the language of cutting covenant but we also have a command in 27:6 to hold off the ceremony until they get to Gerizim and Ebal, and they state the blessings and the curses, and then they have a ratification of covenant, a cutting of covenant with sacrifice. And that is going to be in Joshua chapter 8.

Considering the relationship between this covenant and covenant at Sinai gets us back to our consideration of the title of Deuteronomy. We can see that Deuteronomy is not a second law in the sense that it is something new and apart from the first law given at Mt. Sinai. It is also not merely a repeated law. It is not a repetition of the law of Sinai. There is new information here and a new ceremony required. Each successive generation will need to be challenged to recommit to the mosaic covenant. And that is true even of us today in the new covenant. Every generation needs to recommit to the new covenant. But the successive old covenant generations and our successive new covenant generations, we don't add new material or a new ceremony to the covenant. We recommit. Deuteronomy is something more. It is a formal renewal of covenant with the second generation out of Egypt that includes additional stipulations, a formal covenant declaration, and a

ceremonial requirement. This renewal of covenant becomes part of the legal package, so together with the covenant of Sinai, we have the Mosaic covenant.¹⁸ It is added into and becomes an essential part of Torah, which in the whole is the covenant of Moses.

In addition to chiasm as the literary structure of Deuteronomy and suzerain-vassal treaty as the literary form of Deuteronomy, we recognize the literary style of Deuteronomy as a series of speeches from Moses that set the tone and the voice of the book. This book is a personal communication from the faithful leader of Israel as his life and ministry come to an end. Moses challenges this younger generation of Israelites to hear and obey. Love God with all your heart, soul, and strength. This is your life. The book then ends with a record of Moses' death and with the people on the wrong side of the Jordan river. And though it seems like a strange ending, leaving us here has the effect of challenging every generation of readers with the responsibility to listen and love. It begs a certain set of questions. This call is not for your fathers. This call is for you. You must answer these questions and act on your answers. Who is your God? Who are you? What is your mission? And what are you going to do?

Reflection Questions

1. In this lesson, we gave focus to the beginning and end of Deuteronomy. As you scan through chapters 1-3, what stands out to you as important or confusing or strange?
2. As you scan through chapters 31-34, what stands out to you as important or confusing or strange?
3. Michael recommends viewing the structure of Deuteronomy chiastically. In chiasm, you can often read from one parallel section to the next without losing the thought. Test this with Deuteronomy. Section A is Deuteronomy chapters 1-3 and A' is chapters 31-34, so read the end of the chapter 3 and then jump over and read the beginning of chapter 31. Does the narrative seem to flow smoothly to you from 1-3 to 31-34?
4. What is the narrative of Deuteronomy? How did Numbers end? How does Joshua begin? And what story does Deuteronomy tell in between these two more narrative books?
5. Test the parallelism of B and B'. Section B is Deuteronomy 4-11 and B' is 27-30. So, read the end of chapter 11 and the beginning of chapter 27. Does the thought seem to you to flow smoothly from 4-11 into 27-30?
6. Consider Moses' poem in Deuteronomy 32. Start with the introduction before the poem in 31:24-30 and then the conclusion after the poem in 32:44-47. What stands out to you? Do you notice any repeated phrases in these two sections? Do you notice anything about the order of the repeated phrases?
7. What stands out to you as important or significant in the poem of chapter 32, particularly in regard to these three essential questions:
 - a. Who is God? (How does Moses refer to God in this poem?)
 - b. Who am I? (What does Moses say about the Israelites?)
 - c. What is our mission? (Does Moses even address the mission of the Israelites in this poem?)

¹⁸ Jeffrey J. Niehaus. *Biblical Theology, Volume 2, The Special Grace Covenants, Old Testament*. (Wooster, Ohio: Weaver Book Company, 2017) 109-110. Also, Niehaus. *Biblical Theology, Volume 1, The Common Grace Covenants*. (2014) 212.

Lesson 25: Deuteronomy 4-11 Listen and love

Introduction

Jesus began his earthly ministry by going into the wilderness to fast. The serpent confronted Jesus there, twisting the truth of God to corrupt Jesus' ministry before it began. The serpent used the same strategy successfully to tempt Adam and Eve, twisting the words of God, calling the Lord's character into question. Jesus did what Adam and Eve should have done. He rebuked Satan with the true words of God applied according to their true meaning. Three times Jesus quoted the Bible:

1. "It is written, 'Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God.' "
2. "On the other hand, it is written, 'You shall not put the Lord your God to the test.' "
3. "Go, Satan! For it is written, 'You shall worship the Lord your God, and serve Him only.' "

(Matthew 4:4, 7, 10)

Two points I have to make. First, we rebuke falsehood by correctly applying the Word of truth. Jesus is not just pulling out three nice random quotes that fit the context. Jesus is reaching back into Torah and faithfully handling the Word, according to the meaning in the original context. Jesus knows these verses. He knows the context. Which leads to the second point, Jesus knows Deuteronomy; not just the quotable points in the text, the whole text, the meaning and heart of the text.

The three references he quotes against Satan are Deuteronomy 8:3, 6:18 and 6:16. All three quotes come from the theological exhortation in Deuteronomy chapters 4-11. The section we are going to address in this lesson. It is a wonderful section of Scripture to read over and over, to consider and digest. Jesus also quotes from this section when asked, "What is the greatest commandment?" He responds with Deuteronomy 6:5, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might."

The section does present some difficulty. It is chiastic with several overlapping themes. Concepts keep repeating, but the organizing principle is not easily apparent. In this it is similar to the style of Jesus' final words to his disciples recorded in John 13-17. That section is also chiastic with overlapping themes, beautiful and quotable, but with a flow that is somewhat difficult to grasp.

The overlapping themes in Deuteronomy 4-11 remind me of how waves overlap in a rocky cove. Standing on the rocks of the cove, you can distinguish the waves coming in, rhythmically repeating. But the harmony of those waves is broken by reverberating ripples that bounce back each time a new wave hits the rocks of the cove. Two or three different patterns ripple from the rocks back out against the waves that are rolling in. The water movement seems confused until you begin to identify the overlapping patterns. And as you read Deuteronomy 4-11 several times, certain themes clearly stand out. You see them. But the pattern is difficult to discern. I will help you begin to consider how the pattern of this text works.

If all that sounds complicated, it is a bit complicated. One of the wonderful aspects of this repetitive style is that you can pick up major themes the very first time you read through the text. Still, as you come back again and again, applying your attention to deeper study, there is more to notice, more connections to make, and a pattern begins to emerge.

I'll start with an overview of the structure. Then we will consider the major theme of covenant obedience and several sub-themes Moses uses to develop our understanding of covenant obedience.

The ten-part chiastic structure of Deuteronomy 4-11

The voice of Deuteronomy is the voice of Moses exhorting the people of Israel. The form of Deuteronomy is a suzerain-vassal covenant. The overall structure of Deuteronomy is chiastic. The outer frames are narrative. Chapters 1-3 look back to how this generation came to be camped on the plains of Moab by the Jordan river. The parallel section at the end of the book, chapters 31-34,

describe the renewal of covenant with this second generation out of Egypt and the historic transition from Moses to Joshua. There are two inner frames containing theological narrative, first in chapters 4-11, then in 27-30. The center of the chiasm in 12-26 contains the specific laws of covenant.

| Deuteronomy: Kingdom Renewal | | | | |
|-------------------------------|------------------------------------|-----------------------------------|-------------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| Key Passage: 6:4-5 | | | | |
| A | B | X | B' | A' |
| 1-3
Historical
prologue | 4-11
Theological
exhortation | 12-26
Covenant
stipulations | 27-30
Theological
exhortation | 31-34
Historic
transition |

In this lesson we are considering the first half of the inner frame, chapters 4-11. This is not legal code, and it is not historic narrative. This is a call to consider truths about covenant with Yahweh.

Duane Christensen recommends in the Word Biblical Commentary viewing the structure of these chapters as a ten-part chiasm. That suggestion helped me resolve some of the challenges I had seen in the text but did not know what to do with. And I like very much the idea that this section which highlights the ten commandments also has a ten-part structure. The structure fits the content. In the end, you may not buy into the idea that Moses intended for us to see this in such a developed chiasm. I think there is something to it. It will help us to recognize some of the repetition in the text.

I have noticed in other chiastic texts in the Bible that the author sometimes introduces a parallel frame that stands out as a little odd or out of place to alert the reader to keep looking that this might be a chiastic structure. I think that is happening here in two short passages, one close to the beginning of our section and one close to the end. In 4:41-43, the flow of the text is broken with the report that Moses set apart three cities of refuge. This idea about cities of refuge does not connect with what comes before in chapter 4 nor what comes after in chapter 4. It stands out as odd.

Something similar happens in 10:8-11 where we are told that the Lord set aside the Levites as special to him. That passage fits better with the context but is still an aside, not necessary to the flow of the passage. The law requiring cities of refuge and laws regarding the role of the Levites will be covered later in Deuteronomy right in the center of the legal code in chapters 17-20. It does not need to be addressed here. So, what is the point of these passages? Why break the flow of thought? I think Moses uses these passages to complete his ten-part chiasm and to alert the reader to parallelism in the text. Both passages are just a few verses, both are a little out of place, and both use the phrase "set apart;" set apart the cities and set apart the Levites. It calls to consider, "Is something parallel happening here?" It does not prove that we have chiasm, but it makes you look a little closer.

And looking closer, we see another set of markers standing out in the text. First, the phrase "Now O Israel," or just "Now Israel," occurs only twice in the text. And where it occurs is really interesting. The phrase occurs at the beginning of the two passages on either side of the "set apart" passages. The first is in 4:1,

And now O Israel, listen to the statutes and the judgments which I am teaching you to perform, in order that you may live...

That starts the very first passage of our larger section which ends with the cities of refuge reference. Then, after our setting apart the Levites passage, our final passage of the whole section starts with,

And now, Israel, what does the LORD your God require from you, but to fear the LORD your God, to walk in all his ways and love him, and to serve the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul... (10:12).

So, that's interesting. We now have an A and a B followed by a B' and an A'; "And now O Israel," "set apart," "set apart," "And now, Israel." So, if chapter 4 is chiastically paralleled with chapters 10-11, then maybe the center of the section 5-9 completes the chiasm.

Another phrase leads us to consider more parallelism. "Hear O Israel" shows up three times in 5:1, 6:4 and 9:1. That is not enough to prove a full ten-part chiasm. But it is enough to encourage us to spend time reading through the text and looking for potential parallels. I realize this is getting a little too complicated for an audio lesson. We really need visuals to help us out. And since we do not have a visual of the structure, I am going to stop with the analysis of the chiasm and just quickly go through it. What I have said so far is just how you start to notice the parallelisms through phrases or through words that are set off certain sections.

But I'll just give it to you now, that way, if you want to come back and write it out yourself, you can do that later. I'll also have it printed in the transcript at observetheword.com. You do not need to get this all in your mind for the rest of the lesson. You just need the idea. It is a ten-part structure, so we have five points at the front. A, B, C, D and E, followed by five points at the back in reverse order E', D', C', B' and A'. And there is no middle point x in this particular chiasm.

A is 4:1-40, beginning with "And now, O Israel," and a call to obey Yahweh's commandments.

B is 4:41-43, the setting apart of three cities.

C is 4:44-6:3, beginning and ending with the phrase "This is the Law" and giving us representative of the whole law the ten commandments.

D is 6:4-7:11, which begins "Hear O Israel" and develops the call to obedience as righteousness.

At the center of the chiasm are E and E'.

E is 7:12-26 and communicates the idea when you obey, you will be blessed.

E' is 8:1-20 and communicates the corresponding idea when you disobey, you will perish.

D' is 9:1-29, which, like D begins "Hear O Israel" and also like D speaks about righteousness, though much more pessimistically.

C' is 10:1-7, returning to the receiving of the ten commandments as communicated in C, though this time it is the second receiving of the ten commandments after the sin of the golden calf.

B' is 10:8-11, the setting apart of the Levites.

A' is 10:12-11:25, beginning with "And now O Israel," and a call to obey Yahweh in the heart relationship with him.

A Ten-Part Chiastic Structure of Deuteronomy 4-11

A 4:1-40 And now, O Israel, obey YHWH's commandments

B 4:41-43 Then Moses set apart three cities

C 4:44-6:3 This is the Torah—the Ten Words

D 6:4-7:11 Hear, O Israel, YHWH is our God, YHWH alone

E 7:12-26 When you obey, you will be blessed

E' 8:1-20 When you disobey, you will perish

D' 9:1-29 Hear, O Israel, you are about to cross the Jordan

C' 10:1-7 At that time, YHWH spoke the Ten Words

B' 10:8-11 At that time, YHWH set apart the tribe of Levi

A' 10:12-11:25 And now, O Israel, what does YHWH ask of you?

Alright, with that overview of the structure let's consider some of the themes that ripple through these sections.

Themes of covenant obedience

An overarching theme reoccurs again and again. “And now, O Israel, listen to the statutes and judgments which I am teaching you to perform.... (4:1).” Moses is calling the people of Israel to covenant obedience with Yahweh. And two key words keep getting repeated all over our section. The word *shema*, translated variously as hear, listen, and obey, occurs 33 times in this section of Deuteronomy. The most famous occurrence is the first word of “The Shema,” the Jewish statement of faith in 6:4-5,

Hear, O Israel! The Lord is our God, the Lord is one! You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.

The word literally means to hear and in this context contains the assumption that the one who hears, receives what is heard and acts upon what he hears. Another word, *shamar*, occurs 36 times in this section, being translated as keep, guard or observe, and is in the second verse of the section, 4:2,

You shall not add to the word which I am commanding you, nor take away from it, that you may keep the commandments of the Lord your God which I command you.

When this word applies to the commandments like here that you may “keep the commandments,” it means to observe or do. To “keep” is to observe. When the word is applied to a person it means to guard or watch over, such as in 4:9,

Only give heed to yourself and keep your soul diligently, so that you do not forget the things which your eyes have seen and they do not depart from your heart all the days of your life; but make them known to your sons and your grandsons.

God wants people to be in relationship with him. It is not about religion. It is about relationship. That is true. And relationship with God does not exist without obedience. That part of the message is not always clear in modern Christian communication. We know Jesus wants relationship. We know passages like Jesus told the woman caught in adultery that he does not condemn her. But sometimes we forget to add what he says next, which is “Go and sin no more.” Right relationship with God is a relationship of covenant obedience.

Moses teaching in the section of Deuteronomy develops a number of sub-themes to go along with the overarching theme of covenant obedience. Let’s consider three sub-themes. Covenant obedience requires (1) exclusive faithfulness, (2) self-awareness, and (3) right motives.

Exclusive faithfulness

Let’s start with exclusive faithfulness.

1. God calls people into an exclusive relationship with himself. This is a serious commitment. God really does abhor evil. And he abhors the evil of a human heart that would try to play him or manipulate him or use him. There is a tension in the commandments of God caused by the fallenness of human beings. The tension is not in God himself. He is harmonious all in himself. The tension is created by our brokenness. God hates sin. And God loves people. God is just. And God is compassionate.

Christians fall into a kind of idolatry when they emphasize only one side of the character of God to avoid the tension. I imagine that every nation with a variety of Christian churches and movements includes those who lean towards communication of God’s wrath against sin and also those who lean towards God as compassionate and merciful without referring to sin. This is not an Old Testament, New Testament distinction. Hell is not developed as a theological concept in the Old Testament. No one develops the idea of hell more than Jesus in the gospels. The tension is in the character of God as it relates to us in our fallenness. You know, the tension is that Jesus is both judge and savior. The whole point of the cross is not that Jesus came to save without judging, but that Jesus has already judged. We already stand condemned by Jesus, and therefore, he came to save. That is the full context of John 3:16-18. The cross is the satisfaction of the wrath of God on behalf of all who would

believe. Those who refuse to believe will have to pay the penalty of wrath themselves. And that wrath comes from the holy anger of God.

We might not like the extreme compassion of God. We might not like the consuming anger of God. But the true character of God includes both. In Deuteronomy 4, Moses calls Israel to covenant faithfulness to God whose character includes 4:24, “For the Lord your God is a consuming fire, a jealous God” and also 4:31,

For the Lord your God is a compassionate God; He will not fail you nor destroy you nor forget the covenant with your fathers which He swore to them.

Our covenant obedience begins with pursuing the true character of God with seriousness according to the manner in which he has revealed himself. The passage above says that God is a jealous God. Because of who God is in his character, He expects our covenant relationship to be exclusive. It is not just faithfulness, he requires, but exclusive faithfulness. Other gods, idols, objects of worship, claims to authoritative truth are all excluded from faithful relationship with God, if he is indeed the one true God. Consider three more passages from chapter 4.

First, Deuteronomy 4:2,

You shall not add to the word which I am commanding you, nor take away from it, that you may keep the commandments of the Lord your God which I command you.

God’s word has exclusive authority over you and should not be added to or taken from by anyone other than God. Here is a longer one, Deuteronomy 4:15–19,

¹⁵ “So watch yourselves carefully, since you did not see any form on the day the Lord spoke to you at Horeb from the midst of the fire, ¹⁶ so that you do not act corruptly and make a graven image for yourselves in the form of any figure, the likeness of male or female, ¹⁷ the likeness of any animal that is on the earth, the likeness of any winged bird that flies in the sky, ¹⁸ the likeness of anything that creeps on the ground, the likeness of any fish that is in the water below the earth. ¹⁹ “And *beware* not to lift up your eyes to heaven and see the sun and the moon and the stars, all the host of heaven, and be drawn away and worship them and serve them, those which the Lord your God has allotted to all the peoples under the whole heaven.

God alone is to receive your worship. All idols, all other gods, are excluded. Third, Deuteronomy 4:39,

Know therefore today, and take it to your heart, that the Lord, He is God in heaven above and on the earth below; there is no other.

The call to faithful obedience is a call to obey God on his terms. He has the authority. He is the source of truth. There are no other gods. Our society is not our god. Politics, science, and culture do not define for us who God is or what God expects from us. It works the other way around. We enter into the marketplace of ideas, into politics, science, the arts with a worldview defined by our exclusive commitment to God.

Our relationship with God is meant to be intensely personal, but not solely private. Exclusive does not mean private. It does not mean that we do not have other significant relationships. It means we have no other God or source of final authority. We do have other relationships, and we do bring God with us into our other relationships. And that starts in the home. Parents are supposed to influence their children towards right belief and right relationship with God. That is part of our covenant obedience to God. Moses introduces this idea here in 4:9

Only give heed to yourself and keep your soul diligently, so that you do not forget the things which your eyes have seen and they do not depart from your heart all the days of your life...

And not only are you to keep your own soul. Moses goes on, “...but make them known to your sons and your grandsons.” This is an example of a theme being raised briefly early on in our section and then being further developed later. So, it is raised briefly here in chapter 4, but is developed as a

major theme of chapter 6. And I am not going to look at all of chapter 6 right now. I imagine it is familiar to you, 6:6-7 says,

These words, which I am commanding you today, shall be on your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your sons and shall talk of them when you sit in your house and when you walk by the way and when you lie down and when you rise up.

Our exclusive commitment to God compels us to shepherd the hearts and minds of our children towards their own exclusive commitment to God.

Along with exclusive faithfulness, covenant obedience involves ongoing and increasing self-awareness. This is our second sub-theme, self-awareness.

Self-awareness

I hesitated to use the term self-awareness because it might make you think more of pop-psychology or maybe even new age thinking. I mean to use the term in line with Paul's teaching in Romans 12:3. Paul tells the Romans not to think more highly of themselves than they ought to. Instead they are to consider themselves soberly, not too high, not too low, but accurately. They are to be self-aware.

Moses makes a series of exhortations at the center of our larger section that communicate this requirement of self-awareness. Ongoing covenant obedience requires right thinking about ourselves in relationship to God and his commands.

The love and favor of God can lead people into a wrong evaluation of their own situation. I have heard Europe referred to by a European thinker as a cut flower that blossomed out of a Judeo-Christian worldview but has been cut from those roots, such that Europeans believe that the beauty and success of their society is a result of their own ingenuity and thinking without any significant dependence on God or the Bible. I believe the same applies widely in the United States of America with the belief that Western values have evolved past the biblical worldview. Our success is our own as a result of our work ethic and independent spirit and goodness, and intelligence.

Moses warns the Israelites against this exact kind of thinking. He cautions them to remember where they have come from and when they have success to remember how they got to that success.

In part D of our passage, in 7:7-8, Moses reminds the Israelites,

The Lord did not set His love on you nor choose you because you were more in number than any of the peoples, for you were the fewest of all peoples, but because the Lord loved you and kept the oath which He swore to your forefathers, the Lord brought you out by a mighty hand and redeemed you from the house of slavery, from the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt.

Because he loved you. Not because you were so great and numerous. In the parallel D', in 9:4, Moses adds this,

Do not say in your heart when the Lord your God has driven them out before you, 'Because of my righteousness the Lord has brought me in to possess this land,' but *it is* because of the wickedness of these nations *that* the Lord is dispossessing them before you.

So, in remembering where you have come from, know this, God did not choose you because of your numbers or because of your stellar morality. He chose you because he loves you. He chose you because he chose you. Moving further into the center of our section, Moses tells them in E, in 7:17-18, not to think too lowly of yourselves.

If you should say in your heart, 'These nations are greater than I; how can I dispossess them?' you shall not be afraid of them; you shall well remember what the Lord your God did to Pharaoh and to all Egypt:

But God knows the danger of success. If God says do not fear. And God gives instruction on how to enter the land and how to successfully live in the land, then his people, being people, will eventually take credit for that success, forgetting how fearful and unwise they were in the beginning. And this is in E', 8:11-14,

¹¹ Beware that you do not forget the Lord your God by not keeping His commandments and His ordinances and His statutes which I am commanding you today; ¹² otherwise, when you have eaten and are satisfied, and have built good houses and lived *in them*, ¹³ and when your herds and your flocks multiply, and your silver and gold multiply, and all that you have multiplies, ¹⁴ then your heart will become proud and you will forget the Lord your God who brought you out from the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.

Does that story sound familiar? It is a story that has repeated over and over both on a societal level and on an individual level. On the social level as Christianity wins the hearts of a people, over time the faithful stop trusting God and begin to believe more and more in their own wisdom and judgment. They move from faithful dependence on God and begin to increasingly turn to the methods and strategies of the broader culture for success. For example, we could consider the effect of success on the early Christian church after it was promoted by the Roman Emperor Constantine from oppressed faith, to preferred religion. Or we could consider how some mega-churches move from a strategy of spiritual dependence to strategies that appear more in common with corporate America. This is the ongoing challenge of success. We become successful and then we begin to look at the strategies of our culture, and we forget how we got here.

This story is also repeated on an individual level. I am sure you have experienced something like this. When we are in need and afraid, we are much more likely to depend on God. When we work through our fears, becoming skilled and successful, we forget to go to God in prayer and are much more likely to take credit for the blessings we are receiving. So, before we judge the Israelites too harshly for what we know is coming, we should take the lesson to heart ourselves. Success is hard. Success is spiritual temptation.

There is one further interesting parallel, I'll note here. In D', in 9:4, we read that God did not choose the Israelites because they are righteous. In fact, most of D' is spent reminding Israelites of their past failures. This is where Moses brings up the golden calf and the failure to enter the promise land, and the grumbling rebellions. Moses is emphasizing the Israelites inability to be righteous.

In D, the parallel passage to D', Moses tells the Israelites in 6:25,

It will be righteousness for us if we are careful to observe all this commandment before the Lord our God, just as He commanded us.

Without considering all of the Torah we have studied so far, if we just read this one verse, we could definitely make the mistake of believing Moses is here teaching a works righteousness. Listen to it again, "It will be righteousness for us if we are careful to observe all this commandment before the Lord our God, just as He commanded us." How do you become righteous? By observing all that the Lord has commanded us. This is our righteousness.

But if we do not stop there in chapter 6, but keep studying through Deuteronomy, we come to D' in chapter 9 where Moses comes back to this question of righteous and raises grave questions about Israel's ability live for God. They are reminded of a variety of failures and told, "You were not chosen because of your righteousness."

In our own self-awareness and self-assessment as we consider ourselves soberly and rightly, we have to come back to the two questions of covenant and what we have been taught so far through the first four books of the Pentateuch. The first question of covenant asks, "What makes me acceptable or righteous to be in relationship with holy God?" And we have considered over and over monuments of grace that clearly establish how to answer this question. Remember, Genesis 15:6, "Abraham believed in the Lord and he reckoned it to him as righteousness." Paul develops that verse in Romans 4 after he has declared in Romans 3:20, "by the works of the Law no flesh will be [declared righteous in God's] sight." Righteousness does not come by obedience to the law when we are in this context of answering the first question of covenant. "What makes me acceptable or righteous enough to be in relationship with holy God?" Grace and grace alone received by faith.

So, what does Moses mean by saying, “It will be righteousness for us if we are careful to observe all this commandment before the Lord our God, just as He commanded us.” He cannot be overturning what he has already established. Moses is speaking in the context of covenant faithfulness. When we are already in covenant relationship with God by grace through faith, we are then asking the second question of covenant, “How then shall I live?” Or “How then shall we live?” Being declared righteous by grace, we can now wholeheartedly pursue righteousness in our thoughts, words, and actions. Obedience is our righteousness. But not as an answer to the first question of covenant. This is an answer to the second question of covenant.

So, honest self-awareness recognizes these two truths: First, I do not at all meet the holy perfect standard of God. I am accepted based on the grace of God. And second, God is at work in me so that I can actually do things that please him. As I obey, this is my righteousness. Not a righteousness that makes me stand before the court of God. It does not avail me before God. I cannot depend on my righteousness as my argument on the judgment day. But it is a righteousness that pleases God and brings about the blessings of God.

So far, we have considered two sub-themes to covenant obedience. We have considered the requirements of exclusive faithfulness and some issues that go along with that. And we have considered humble self-awareness and issues related to that. Covenant obedience also requires right motive.

Right motive

So, what is the right motive? I am tempted to just say love and be done with it. In the end love is going to be prime motive. “Hear, O Israel! The Lord is our God, the Lord is one! You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.”

But that is not where we start. The theme of love will be developed as a major theme of Deuteronomy 4-11. But not really until chapter 6. It is not the starting point. We are going to build up to it. But before we get there, Moses mentions at least three other motives.

Consequences as motive

First, we get the motive of consequences, rewards and punishments. This is the motive introduced in the very first verse of the whole section in 4:1,

¹ Now, O Israel, listen to the statutes and the judgments which I am teaching you to perform, so that you may live and go in and take possession of the land which the Lord, the God of your fathers, is giving you.

Along with positive consequences for obedience, there are negative consequences for disobedience. This is Deuteronomy 4:25–26,

²⁵ When you become the father of children and children’s children and have remained long in the land, and act corruptly, and make an idol in the form of anything, and do that which is evil in the sight of the Lord your God so as to provoke Him to anger, ²⁶ I call heaven and earth to witness against you today, that you will surely perish quickly from the land where you are going over the Jordan to possess it. You shall not live long on it, but will be utterly destroyed.

I am going to wait to develop this idea of reward and punishment in future lessons. It is actually very easy to get the wrong idea about reward and punishment, primarily because we are all legalists at heart and that is how we filter these statements. So, we need to spend some time on that. Right now, it is enough to recognize that the consequences of covenant obedience are one of the valid motives for obeying.

Witness as motive

A second motive is witness. Moses says this in 4:6-8,

⁶ So keep and do *them*, for that is your wisdom and your understanding in the sight of the peoples who will hear all these statutes and say, ‘Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people.’ ⁷ For what great nation is there that has a god so near to it as is the

Lord our God whenever we call on Him? ⁸ Or what great nation is there that has statutes and judgments as righteous as this whole law which I am setting before you today?

God gave Israel identity and purpose in Exodus 19:6, “you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.” A kingdom of priests represents God before all peoples and mediates for all people, helping bring anyone who would come into relationship with God.” Moses teaches Deuteronomy 4:6-8 that the obedience of the Israelites plays a crucial role in their witness as priests. Obedience to God’s command makes a people wise and understanding. “What nations has laws like these?” One of the tragedies of our modern world is that refugees streaming into the West, into Europe or the United States or Canada, are not recognizing how much of the order and law and freedom and success of the West comes from a worldview originally grounded in the Bible. It is tragic that the witness has been lost.

As God’s people, we still have the ability to live out the righteousness of God in a way that witnesses to others in our communities. Jesus call for us to be salt and to be a light on a hill is the same idea Moses is communicating. Of course, covenant obedience does not guarantee that we will find favor with non-believers in our societies. Israel has plenty of people wanting to destroy them from day one up still to today for their commitment to the shema, “Hear, O Israel! The Lord is our God, the Lord is one!” No matter how well we live out the commands of God, the gospel will smell of life to some and death to others. Moses is focusing here on those who will see and be attracted. Just as with the Israelites then, so also with us today, if we walk with God in covenant obedience, there will be some who see the practical effects in our finances, in our parenting, in our marriages, in our business relationships, in our compassion, in our stand for justice, in our convictions. They will be drawn to God through us. That is one of the motives for covenant obedience.

And then of course, there is love.

Love as motive

Just as in the New Covenant, so also in the Old Covenant, the law was not intended for believers to be a legal code imposed by governing authorities or a ritual code imposed by priests. It was given, so that those who love God and worship him will have the means of expressing their love through obedience. Torah law did serve as a legal code for society for all Jews, whether they sought to follow Yahweh or not. At the same time, it provided a call for faithful individuals to enter into obedient relationship with their heavenly Father from the heart motive of love.

Jesus develops this connection between love and obedience, speaking to his disciples on the night of his arrest. John 14:21 records Jesus as saying,

He who has My commandments and keeps them is the one who loves Me; and he who loves Me will be loved by My Father, and I will love him and will disclose Myself to him.

It is possible to take this as manipulative. If you love me you will ... blank. You can imagine a man or woman using this conditionally, manipulatively. If you love me you will... You can fill it in. That is not what Jesus is communicating. He is not stating a conditional. He is stating an indicative, a fact. If you really do love God, if that is a true fact about you, then you will desire to keep his commandments. And you will keep them. And you will enter into relationship. And you will experience love from him. That is what love looks like towards your heavenly Father, towards your rightful King, towards your God. That is what love looks like in an authority relationship. To love in such a relationship is to obey. If you choose to reject the will of God and go and do as you please, then you show that you do not love your God. It is not a conditional. It is a fact. If you just don’t care about God’s will in your life, you refuse to accept his authority, you do not love him. Or, at the very least, you are not loving him in that moment.

We could not state this call to love more completely than Moses does in Deuteronomy 6:5, “You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.” This is not a concept new with the New Testament. This is the expectation delivered by Moses as he called this second generation to renewal of covenant with God. Covenant obedience is to come from inside

with all one's heart and all one's soul and all one's strength. We see here with certainty that acceptance into relationship with God must be based on grace for who can keep such a high calling of love? How do I love God with all that I am consistently? I don't. And I never will; not until I get to heaven. But having been accepted by grace, God frees his people to pursue love for him wholeheartedly without fear in failure.

The Exhortation to walk with God in Deuteronomy 10:12-22

I am going to conclude by reading from the last part of our larger section in Deuteronomy. This is the beginning of A', Deuteronomy 10:12-22. We have said that the voice of Deuteronomy is Moses speaking first person to Israel. It is a plea to Israel. And parts of the book really read better out loud as sermons. It may be hard to follow all of this just from listening as I read. And that's okay. I'd love for you to go back later and read chapter 10 on your own. Now, I just want you to get a feel for it. And recognize that Jesus words in John 14 have a strong connection with the heart presented here in Deuteronomy. As you listen, see if you catch who is loving whom. Who does God love? And who are God's people to love? Here we go, this is Deuteronomy 10:12-22.

¹² Now, Israel, what does the Lord your God require from you, but to fear the Lord your God, to walk in all His ways and love Him, and to serve the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, ¹³ and to keep the Lord's commandments and His statutes which I am commanding you today for your good? ¹⁴ Behold, to the Lord your God belong heaven and the highest heavens, the earth and all that is in it. ¹⁵ Yet on your fathers did the Lord set His affection to love them, and He chose their descendants after them, *even* you above all peoples, as *it is* this day. ¹⁶ So circumcise your heart, and stiffen your neck no longer. ¹⁷ For the Lord your God is the God of gods and the Lord of lords, the great, the mighty, and the awesome God who does not show partiality nor take a bribe. ¹⁸ He executes justice for the orphan and the widow, and shows His love for the alien by giving him food and clothing. ¹⁹ So show your love for the alien, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt. ²⁰ You shall fear the Lord your God; you shall serve Him and cling to Him, and you shall swear by His name. ²¹ He is your praise and He is your God, who has done these great and awesome things for you which your eyes have seen. ²² Your fathers went down to Egypt seventy persons *in all*, and now the Lord your God has made you as numerous as the stars of heaven.

Did you notice how Moses frames the call to love? Who does God love? Well, God loved their fathers. And God loves the aliens among them. So, who are the Israelites to love? They are to love God with everything they have. And they are to love the aliens among them. Sounds a lot like Jesus, doesn't it?

Reflection Questions

1. Skim through chapters 4-11 paying attention to the ten part chiasm presented in this lesson. Read the "set apart" B and B' sections in 4:41-43 and 10:8-11. And take note of the beginning verses in each section. What stands out to you as you consider this structure?
2. Read through chapter 4. What stands out to you as interesting or strange or important?
3. Describe in your own words the connection between the call to covenant obedience through this section and the call to love in the Shema (Deuteronomy 6:4-5). Consider also John 14:15-24.
4. Do you think it is possible to love someone in an authority relationship without being committed to obey the one in authority? Why does love want to obey a father or a king or God?
5. Read the texts quoted in this lesson regarding self-awareness: 7:7-8, 7:17-18, 8:11-14 and 9:4. When have you seen this temptation in your own life? Think of a time when you knew you were weak or unskilled or lacking insight and trusted God and he brought you success. Think also of a time you trusted in your own abilities and still succeeded. How would you describe your inner state after each experience? How do you relate to the warning Moses is giving the Israelites?
7. Read 10:12-22. What stands out to you?

Lesson 26: Deuteronomy 5:17-21 Ten Commandments - Love your neighbor

Introduction

In our last lesson we covered a large section of Deuteronomy, the 8 chapters of Deuteronomy 4-11. It is the first of two theological exhortation sections in the book. And as an overarching theme is a call to covenant obedience. Listen and love. Obey from your heart for this is life.

In this lesson, we are zooming in to consider only 5 verses. In this context of covenant obedience, we are focusing in on the ten commandments, actually we are focusing on the second half of the ten commandments in this lesson and the first half of the ten commandments in our next lesson.

We have already recognized in Torah law that at times the bar seems to be set quite low. That's true of the ten commandments. Taking this list as the bar for moral perfection, you might be doing pretty well. Now, let me ask you, "When was the last time you murdered somebody? Was it any time in the last week or have you made it through an entire month?" Have you ever heard anyone argue for their own good character this way, "Well, I've never killed anybody?"

"Really, you think that is the bar? God is so pleased with you because you have managed to make it through life so far without killing anybody? That's God's standard for good behavior?"

I can imagine applying that with the next command. "Hey, honey, I'm home. And guess what? You will be really pleased with me. I did not commit adultery one time today." Is that the bar my wife sets on our marriage?

"On a scale from 1-10, as long as he does not commit adultery, I guess we are at a 10. We're doing good."

No. Of course the bar is higher. We have already talked about two significantly different functions of Torah law. The Mosaic Covenant defines the people of God as a geo-political entity. Israel is to function as a nation. Therefore, Israel needs a civil code. God gives them a code based on his moral character, but the objective of the code is not to demand God's full moral will. As a civil code, Torah operates as a low bar to minimize the effects of sin and to bring about order in society. The penal code does not apply at all to those who fail to do good. Failure to do good is not criminally punished. The penal code is for those who choose to do bad. As long as you are a decent person, you manage to fulfill this civil function of the Torah pretty well.

But the Torah is not merely a civil code. Torah law also functions as a call to a much higher standard. We see this in other commands, such as do not covet, that's not so easy; love your God with all you're your heart, soul, and might; love your neighbor; love the foreigner among you; be holy as God is holy.

The ten commandments serve as a moral paradigm for the whole covenant law. And yet, the ten commandments are mostly expressed in the extreme negative form. It is designed to be enforceable. The civil function to minimize sin and bring about order is most apparent in the ten commandments. We have to look closer to understand how these ten general commandments also serve in calling us to the highest of moral standards.

We are going to take our cue from Jesus. In the Sermon on the Mount, recorded in Matthew 5-7, Jesus provides us with an interpretative approach for understanding the ten commandments as a moral continuum. There is a lot in the Sermon on the Mount. I get excited about the thought of investigating these chapters more deeply, but I am going to hold myself back and limit myself to points that I believe will help us to rightly interpret how the ten commandments operate as a paradigm for all moral command.

Jesus specifically addresses Torah commands in 5:21-48. He begins with the commands against murder and adultery. Which is why we are starting with those commands of murder and adultery. If we back out a little and look at both sides of this section, we pick up on the fact that Jesus is framing his message in opposition to the morality of the pharisees. Let's back up to Matthew 5:13-16.

That is where Jesus says, you need to be salt and light. People should see you and see a difference. We encountered the same idea in our last lesson in Deuteronomy 4:6-8. Pursue righteousness as a witness to God. This means your righteousness should be visible for others to see, a light on a hill.

How are we salt? How are we light? What does that look like? Well, Jesus says in Matthew 5:17,

Do not think that I came to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I did not come to abolish but to fulfill.

We are going to come back to what Jesus means by fulfilling the law. But he set this conversation in terms of the law. And for now, let's move on to what he says about the pharisees three verses later in 5:20,

For I say to you that unless your righteousness surpasses *that* of the scribes and pharisees, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven.

That is a hard saying for the Jews listening to Jesus, because the pharisees are known and respected as the religious party that advocates serious religious observance and real moral obedience. How can anybody hope to gain entry into the kingdom of heaven if that requires being even more righteous than the pharisees?

What's going on here is that Jesus is using the pharisees, the most prominent example of religious legalism, as a contrast to the moral vision he is teaching. Their moral vision is a legalistic vision by which a person enters the kingdom of God by attaining a high righteous standard. Later, in chapter 6, Jesus is going to come back to the morality of the pharisees by targeting their hypocrisy. A person who buys into a legalistic vision of morality loves to be recognized for long, spiritual prayers, for giving to the poor, for fasting, for whatever practices are recognized by others as honorable and spiritual.

Jesus creates a contrast here with his words about salt and light. Earlier, he said be seen. You are to be a light. You are to be visible. Now in chapter 6, he says, do it in secret. Healthy morality becomes apparent in the way people live and treat each other. Legalism uses ritual and morality as a way to build up the self. In providing a way by which human beings attain their own righteousness, legalism promotes pride and boasting. You have done it. You have achieved it. You are good by your own works. Hypocrisy becomes a huge temptation in the legalistic system because your identity and sense of importance is based on your own attainment of righteousness, and it is affirmed when others recognize how righteous you are. There is a contrast between the works of righteousness done by the legalist whose hope is to earn recognition from God and recognition from man, and the works of righteousness promoted by Jesus which bring honor to God who is working through his people. That kind of morality is supposed to be seen as a light. It is attractive.

Jesus has a high vision of righteousness, but it is not based on human achievement. Jesus began his Sermon on the Mount with the beatitudes. This is the first thing he said, "Blessed are the poor in spirit..." Is the legalist poor in spirit? No, in his eyes he is rich in spirit. He does not love much because he does not believe he needs to be forgiven of much. Jesus next says, "Blessed are those who mourn..." Over what do they mourn? They mourn over their poverty of spirit. They recognize they are poor in spirit, so they mourn. The woman who came into the house of the pharisee weeping and washing Jesus' feet with her tears, she mourned at the poverty of her own soul, at the awareness of her own sinfulness. She washed Jesus' feet. She felt dirty. She was cleaned by Jesus. She was forgiven much, so she loved much. We do not feel the need for a savior, and we do not feel the need for grace, until we realize the poverty of our own spirit to the degree that we begin to mourn over our sinful state. If you are satisfied in your religiosity, you do not need grace.

Jesus goes on, "Blessed are the meek." And that is not the same thing as weak. It is better understood as humble. Those who recognize their poverty and mourn, they are the ones who bow down humbly before their king. The woman who washed his feet with her tears was meek. She was humble. She was not standing on her own pride. That is in contrast to the legalist who boasts of their

righteousness. Next Jesus says, “blessed are those who hunger and thirst after righteousness.” The humble vision of faith that recognizes a need for a savior hunger and craves, the righteous vision of God. This is not desiring righteousness for self-satisfaction or to build up one’s own identity. This is a hunger after God. This is a hungering to be like God, to walk with God, to live for God. It begins with recognizing how poor you are in spirit, by mourning over that poverty, by becoming meek and humble enough to receive grace, and from that there becomes a desire, a craving for righteousness.

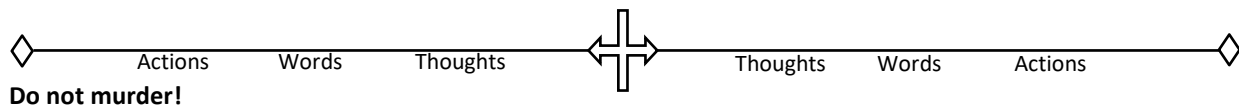
Jesus attacks the pharisees at the point of righteousness. It is the same place that any legalistic system must be attacked, whether Jewish legalism or Christian legalism. or Muslim legalism. “You say that a person must be holy to enter the kingdom of God. We agree. And that person’s holiness must surpass any human system of righteousness that you have set up. Whatever you think is righteous enough, you’ve got to go past that. It’s got to go beyond what the pharisees think righteousness truly is.” The legalist needs to see that the standard is so high that it cannot be reached. That’s how Jesus ends chapter 5. “Therefore you are to be perfect, as your heavenly father is perfect.” That is a hopeless statement if perfection is required for acceptance. It is an acceptable vision if we are already accepted. I can pursue perfection without fear or worry of not attaining it, if my acceptance is not based on attaining perfection.

So, to understand what Jesus is saying to the pharisees, we have to recognize that both questions of covenant are at play any time we talk about human righteousness. Your righteousness cannot surpass that of the pharisees. That is the point. There will be no place for boasting and no need for hypocrisy. You can be vulnerable and real before God, because the first question of covenant is not answered at all by your human achievement. Perfection is required. Perfection must be given. Remember the first question of covenant, “What makes me acceptable or righteous enough to be in relationship with holy God?” And Jesus’ answer is going to agree with the law and the prophets. As we have seen through our series, the law teaches that our acceptability is based 100% on the grace of God. Human legalism cannot get us there. That is a wrong view of the law. The monuments of grace in Torah law are all fulfilled in Jesus: God walking through the covenant sacrifice in Genesis 15, God passing over houses marked by the blood of the lamb in Exodus 12, God providing the blood of a goat to cover mercy seat of the ark of the covenant and another goat to carry sin away from the camp in Leviticus 16, God raising the curse on a pole in Numbers 21 and giving salvation to anyone who looks at it. Each one of these ceremonial symbols points to our need for someone to take our place. It points to Jesus. They point to the cross. This is the way your righteousness exceeds that of the pharisees. Because you receive it as a gift of grace. You receive it by faith. You receive the righteousness of Christ.

When we turn to the second question of covenant, we realize that there is another way in which Jesus fulfills the law and the prophets. Jesus’ moral vision is not one of legalism. At the same time, it is also not one of no law. At the end of the Sermon on the Mount, in 7:23, Jesus is going to say to those who come claiming his name, “Depart from me, you who practice lawlessness.” Lawlessness in the Greek is the word *anomia*, which is literally, “without law.” While grace does reject legalism, grace does not advocate the way of *anomia* or no law. As Paul put it in Romans 7:6, the moral vision of Christ is a call to the new way of the Spirit. It is a way of obedience based on the moral vision of God. The second question of covenant asks, “How then shall I live, now that I am in relationship with God?” Jesus gives us a call to righteousness grounded on the fact that we have already been accepted into relationship with God by grace. We can accept the call to a high standard of righteousness because whether we fully achieve that standard or not has no affect on our acceptance, our identity, our worth, our security. We have all that in Christ by grace. So, the righteousness of Christ becomes a vision to strive towards, not a standard to be judged by.

So, recognizing the context of the Sermon on the Mount includes both a call to faithful obedience and also a rejection of the pharisees’ legalism, let’s now begin with Jesus’ interpretation of commandment number six, the first commandment of this lesson, “Do not murder.”

The Ten Commandments as a moral paradigm



To clarify, murder is not the same thing in God's eyes as taking a life, not quite. God commands the death penalty as part of civil law in the Torah. God allows for death that may come from self-defense against an intruder in one's own home that's Exodus 22:2-3. And God allows soldiers to kill in a just war. I am not going to get into the discussion about how those laws apply today. I am simply pointing out that even though the Hebrew word can be translated here, "Do not kill," the context of Torah law is quite clear that we have to make some distinction that allows for both capital punishment and self-defense. This commandment is rightly understood in the Exodus and Deuteronomy contexts, not as "Do not kill," but as "Do not murder." No individual citizen has the right to take someone else's life, except possibly in certain cases of self-defense.

So, what is murder? Murder is contempt for the life of another human being to the degree that you are willing to cut off that life for your own gain or pleasure. So, imagine yourself standing in the middle of a continuum, on a long straight path. And standing in the middle of the path, you look to your left, and down at the far end of the path you see the command, "Do not murder!" It is the extreme negative destination. And we tend to think of murder only in the sense of that extreme negative. But as soon as we turn down that path of contempt for the life of another person, whatever the form that contempt or that hatred reveals itself, we have committed the sin of murder. This is how Jesus puts it in Matthew 5:21-22,

²¹ You have heard that the ancients were told, 'You shall not commit murder' and 'Whoever commits murder shall be liable to the court.' ²² But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother shall be guilty before the court; and whoever says to his brother, 'You good-for-nothing,' shall be guilty before the supreme court; and whoever says, 'You fool,' shall be guilty *enough to go* into the fiery hell.

Jesus begins with the civil idea of "You shall not murder." And if you murder you are liable before the court. And then he uses that same language of court, but he is raising it up to judgment day court. I mean, notice how strong this is. Jesus is not pulling any punches at all. If you are angry, you are guilty. If you call someone names or call someone a fool, you are guilty enough to go to hell. There is no softening this. "The wages of sin is death (Romans 6:23)." If you take one step down the path of murder, then you have fallen short of the righteous standard of God. You must be judged guilty. You will be separated from God for ever.

I could ask you again, "How are you doing? Have you committed murder this year? This week? Today? Have you been angry? Have you shown contempt for another person's life? Have you called somebody, in your mind or out loud, stupid or worthless or bastard or bitch? Have you done it in your mind? Jesus starts with anger. This is an internal moral state. If you have taken that step in your mind, you may not even have spoken the words out loud, but if you express contempt in your mind, if you rolled around in your head the choice words you want to say, then, according to Jesus, you have broken the law of murder.

Thank you, God for the cross! What hope is there without the cross? Without Jesus taking our place of death, we have no hope, no hope. Thank you that right now we are no longer talking about the first question of covenant, that you have got us covered in grace, that we are saved by the blood of Jesus. We do not stand at the judgment seat, but you push us aside. And you take the stand for us. And we are not judged according to our ritual or according to our morality, but we are judged by grace, that we stand in the grace of Jesus and have the righteousness of Jesus. Thank you that we are right now talking about the second question of covenant and not the first question of covenant. The pharisees need to hear this, because they need to be convicted. The legalist needs to be convicted.

The Christian who thinks we are saved by some kind of righteousness needs to be convicted. You need to know that if you have had any anger in your heart or your mind then you are guilty of the fires of hell. And if you don't get that, then you do not have the right poverty of spirit. You do not understand how poor you are. And you have not begun to mourn. And you have not become meek. And you do not hunger and thirst after the righteousness of God. And you will not be filled. If you do not get that.

But if you have placed your faith in Christ. And received his grace. Then we are not talking about the first question of covenant. You are not made acceptable by your ability to not murder in your mind. We are now talking about the second question of covenant, not the first. And we are free to truly consider the call of Christ to live in obedience. And yes, we have remorse. We are sorry for our anger. We are sorry when our minds let go. But no, we do not have fear. "For there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus (Romans 8:1)." We stand secure in him, not on our own righteousness. We are not pursuing morality as a standard we must achieve. We are pursuing morality as right relationship with our Lord and as the right way to experience the abundance of human life.

Human life is not experienced through hate. Hate is an aspect of human death. Human life is not to show contempt for other human beings who bear the image of God. No matter how fallen and broken and sinful, every human being bears the dignity of our Creator's image.

The path on the road of murder begins with thoughts, it moves to words, and it comes forth in action, and, only in the most extreme cases, ends in the snuffing out of physical life. But as parents, teachers, colleagues, bosses, friends, neighbors, whenever we communicate with cutting, judgmental, condescending voices we suppress life, we show contempt for life, we snuff out life, we take away life.

I know as a parent that I have a life-stealing edge to my voice. I communicate disappointment, maybe not with the words, but with my tone. I communicate, "You do not live up. You disappoint me. You are not good enough. You are not smart enough. You are not a good child." With my tone, I communicate not that "I am disappointed in your behavior," but "I am disappointed in you." And that steals life. And I can do that even without speaking. I can do that with my creased brow and stern look. Some parents are great at communicating through silence, judgmental, disappointed, contemptuous silence.

Jesus teaches that murder starts in the mind with our thoughts, then moves outwardly with words of gossip and slander, and contempt and judgmentalness and then to action, spitting, biting, hitting. It is a continuum, it's a path.

So, now we can come back and ask, "Is God satisfied with me if I avoid murder in my thoughts, words, and actions?" Is this the higher bar that we are called to pursue? Well, I would say that God is pleased that you are resisting those things. And you are trying not to think thoughts of death or use words that steal life or actions that steal life. So, yes, God is pleased with that. But he is not satisfied if you only resist the bad side of the continuum. Christianity is not primarily about avoiding negative action, but rather, about pursuing positive action. We stand in the middle of the continuum. And we look to our left and see murder. And moving down the path in that direction is broken relationship and corruption and hurt and death. And when you turn to the right and you set your back on murder, you turn your back on the corruption of sin, you are facing the good, and what do you see? If physical murder is the extreme negative end of the continuum, what behavior do you think lies at the extreme positive end? What are we being called towards? What would you say? What is the opposite of "Do not murder?"

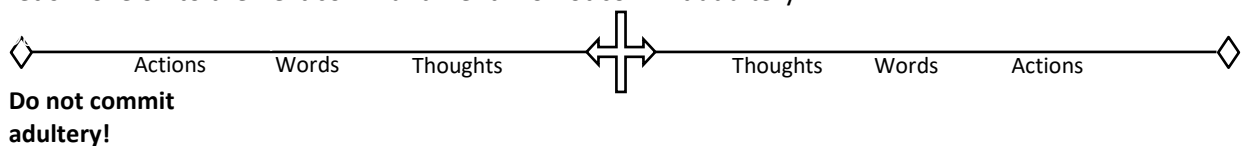
The most common response I get to that question is, "Love. Love is the opposite of murder." And that's good. But I want to get a little more specific. I am going to go with Jesus' words in John 15:13, "Greater love has no one than this, that one lay down his life for his friends." If at the extreme negative end of the continuum a person shows so much contempt for another life that they remove

that life for their own benefit, then at the extreme positive is the person who cares so much that they are willing to give up their own life to preserve another person's life.

The negative side of the continuum is the taking of life through thoughts, words and actions. The positive side is the giving of life through thoughts, words and actions. As Paul wrote, in Ephesians 4:29, "Let no unwholesome word proceed from your mouth, but only such *a word* as is good for edification according to the need *of the moment*, so that it will give grace to those who hear." These are words of life. Give words of life. Cut out the biting sarcasm, and the judgmental tone, the put downs, angry accusations, passive aggressive Facebook posts. Choose to speak life.

And before the words, it begins in the mind. Choose how you will mentally think about other people. Whether you are thinking about your spouse, your children, your colleagues, members of opposing political parties, other drivers on the road, fellow students, neighbors, you have to start with your mind. And the words come up, they just come up, "stupid, good-for-nothing, lazy, hurtful, foolish, corrupt, that idiot" and you have to battle those words in your mind. I suggest that you start by claiming these truths about that other person, when you are tempted towards contempt say this, "he is the image of God, created by God, loved by God, atoned for by God." Every person you will ever meet has the extreme dignity of having been created in the image of God and having been loved by God to the degree that God laid down his own life for that person. Jesus already died for them. And you can say in your mind about every person you meet, "God made you, Christ died for you." And in that they have dignity. And they deserve your respect. Yes, they are broken. Yes, they are sinful. Yes, some of those negative words apply to their behavior. But that does not give you the right to define a person according to that behavior. They may be that, but they are more than that. And God has called you to love. And love begins with speaking words of life in your mind about the other person.

Let's move on to the next commandment. Do not commit adultery.



We are standing again in the middle of a path. Looking to one end of the path, and we see the sin of adultery.

Jesus speaks to this commandment next in Matthew 5:27-30,

²⁷ You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery'; ²⁸ but I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust for her has already committed adultery with her in his heart. ²⁹ If your right eye makes you stumble, tear it out and throw it from you; for it is better for you to lose one of the parts of your body, than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. ³⁰ If your right hand makes you stumble, cut it off and throw it from you; for it is better for you to lose one of the parts of your body, than for your whole body to go into hell.

Again, Jesus speaks quite strongly about hell. One step down this path in the wrong direction leads to eternal condemnation. And again, we need to remember the context. In part, Jesus is here attacking the religious legalism of the pharisees. If you really accept a vision of the law as a standard that qualifies you as righteous enough to enter the kingdom of heaven, then your righteousness must surpass even that of the pharisees. If you want to stand on law instead of grace for your acceptance before God, then let's really consider what holiness is. What is the standard? According to Jesus you will be held accountable for the sin that begins in your mind. If you lust in your heart for a man or woman who is not your spouse, then you have committed the sin of adultery. But again, we say thank you God for the cross. Thank you that, unlike a religious legalist, we are not talking about the first question of covenant. And so, we are not afraid that our sin will send us to hell. We are not talking about achieving our own standard of righteousness. We would be without hope. Instead, we

recognize that we have been made acceptable by the grace of Jesus. We are declared righteous as a gift of faith. So, for us, we are talking about the righteousness of the second question of covenant, "Having been accepted by grace, how then shall we live?" Give us your vision Jesus for how we should live, so that we might pursue that life.

Now, as we move on, we need to make a distinction here between the sin nature and sin. I have a sin nature. Something in me is broken. I have desires and thought patterns that run contrary to the goodness of God. Because of that, sinful images and ideas pop into my mind on a regular basis, whether we are talking about sexual sin or the sin of murder and hate. Contemptuous, judgmental thoughts enter my mind without me doing anything to bring them there. So do sexual thoughts. That is my sin nature. It might even be Satan using my sin nature, but I am not going to focus on Satan right now. My own sin nature is enough of a culprit to explain those thoughts. That is me. I have to own it. I am not basically good. I am fallen and broken. On the other hand, I am not essentially my sin nature. I know I am not, because when I enter into the kingdom of God my physical body will be glorified and this body of sin I have right now will be done away with. My sin nature will be gone, and I will still be me. So, it is not essential to who I am. But it is my present reality, my reality before heaven. And so, I have to own it.

Sin is different from the thoughts that pop out because of my sin nature. Sin is what I do with those initial desires and thoughts after they rise up in my mind. It is not the initial desires and thoughts. That is just my sin nature. But if I do anything with that, then I have committed sin. If I see a sexy image online or a pretty woman walking down the street, and chemical urges rise up in me and flashing in my mind inappropriate images, then it is at that moment I have a choice to make. That is where I can engage in the battle in my mind. It is what I do with those thoughts that will constitute whether I sin or not. If I choose to keep staring. If I choose to feed on those images. If I chose to play out a fantasy in my mind. If I chose to think about that woman as an object of sexual gratification, then, according to Jesus, I have committed adultery.

What do I do then? Well, I confess it immediately, thank God for his forgiveness, and ask him to dwell in my heart and my mind through the power of the Holy Spirit. I also replace those thoughts with true thoughts. As with the temptation toward hate, I find it very helpful to claim the dignity of the woman I am looking at. Well, first I stop looking. But if it is a woman I am around for any reason, then I remind myself of the truth about that woman. She is a daughter of Eve created in the image of God with the dignity and goodness of God. She is not an object of gratification. She is a person for whom Christ died. She is mind and soul.

But even more importantly, I turn my thoughts to God. I do not want my thoughts to dwell on a woman who is not my wife, even if I am speaking truth about her to myself. I might do that quickly but then I change my thoughts to think about the glory and goodness of God. I remind myself who I serve. I remind myself that my greatest aim is to love him and serve him and bring him glory with my life. That's how I engage the battle of my thoughts. I don't just dwell on the sin. I seek thoughts of God. I seek to turn towards a greater desire. For me, when I was younger, the struggle to reject sexual thoughts was more difficult and often took a lot longer. Now, it is really momentary. The thoughts comes up, I address the battle in my mind, and I quickly move on.

Standing on the path, few men or women look to the end of physical adultery and think, "I would like to ruin my marriage today. And while I am at it, I will shoot for making my kids hate me." Nobody starts with that. You don't start with good relationship and just dive into the end. It starts with a series of small steps down the path. It starts in the thought life. It moves to words and actions, to time on the internet looking at pornography or to working things out so that you spend more time alone at work with a particular person. It moves to a touch here or there. There are justifications all along the way. There is a silent battle. And if anything is shared with a friend, it is not usually shared with a Christian friend. The adulterer, the person going down this road, making these small steps, avoids that kind of person. If anything is said, it is said to someone sure to affirm the justifications

already going on in the mind. And then it finally happens. And you have that thought, “How did I get here? But you know exactly how you got there. You got there through a series of small steps bolstered by silent self-justifications.

From a biblical point of view, adultery is not only committed by a married person having sex with someone other than their spouse. Any time you engage in sexual activity with a person who is not your spouse, you are engaging in sexual activity with someone’s potential future spouse. Not only are you sinning against God and against your own body, you are sinning against that person’s future husband or future wife. And you are sinning against your future husband or your future wife. You are storing up images in your mind that you will eventually take with you into your future marriage bed.

The biblical call to sexual holiness is a call to reserve sex for marriage. And marriage is defined as a union between a man and a woman. We have covered that idea already in the law of Moses. It is a vision that continues through the prophets and through the New Testament.

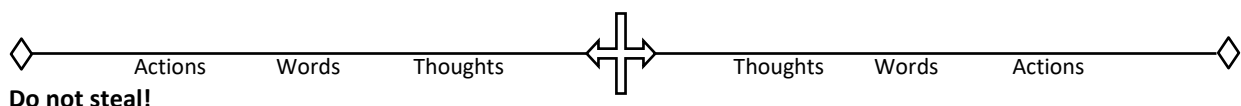
Now again, as with murder, Christianity is not primarily about not doing. The biblical moral vision calls us to turn our backs on adultery but then turn towards a vision of life, that includes sexual intimacy in marriage. We need to turn our eyes towards the other direction of the continuum. So, when we turn our backs on adultery and look up the path to the other end, what is the positive extreme on the other side of the continuum? What is the opposite of “Do not commit adultery?”

I like Ephesians 5:25 as a positive opposite, “Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself up for her.” How did Christ love the church? Well, he died for her. This is very similar to the positive opposite of our first command, “Do not murder, but instead show love by giving up your life.” But instead of giving up your life for a friend, it is specifically applied to the marriage relationship, giving up your life for your spouse.

And even though, as a man, I sometimes dream about the glory of diving in front off a bullet to save my damsel in distress, Brenda assures me that she would prefer the everyday giving up of my life over the moment of glory giving up my life. It is a giving up your life by taking out the trash, engaging in the partnership of marriage. It includes taking lead in the spiritually environment in the home. For the woman it includes showing respect and holding back negative words, especially in public. It is a giving up of one’s own desires in the moment to benefit the life of your spouse.

Paul goes on to describe the husband’s role in Ephesians 5 as seeking the holiness and sanctity of his wife, seeking her growth in Christ, her walk with God, supporting her as she is increasingly conformed into the image of Christ. Paul reminds the husband that this is life. It may feel like your giving up your life, but in the end, it is a gain of life. You are one body with your wife. And as you give up selfish desires, you really are promoting your own good as you experience marriage the way God designed marriage to be experienced. In your thoughts, in your words, and in your actions, delight in your wife and seek her good; delight in your husband and seek his good.

If you are dating this should also be your goal, the good of the person you are dating, that they might continue to grow into the image of Christ. You are loving them and preparing them in the purity of a romantic friendship for relationship with their future spouse, whether that future spouse is you or whether you will be handing them off to another brother or sister in Christ.



In Matthew 5, Jesus does not continue on with the rest of the ten commandments after addressing “Do not murder.” and “Do not commit adultery.” But we can continue on, following his lead. I spent a lot of time on these first two commandments in order to establish the pattern.

For every commandment we can imagine ourselves standing on a path with an extreme negative at one end and a positive opposite at the other end. In both directions, the continuum moves from thoughts to words to actions. We walk with God by turning our back to the negative end, to

corruption and death and by turning toward the positive end, fixing our eyes, on health and life. Morality for us is not a standard to achieve. Morality is a vision to pursue. And ultimately it is Jesus standing there at the end of the path. He is our vision for life. We pursue him by pursuing life according to his vision.

Having set this pattern, I will move more quickly through the next three commandments, starting with “Do not steal.”

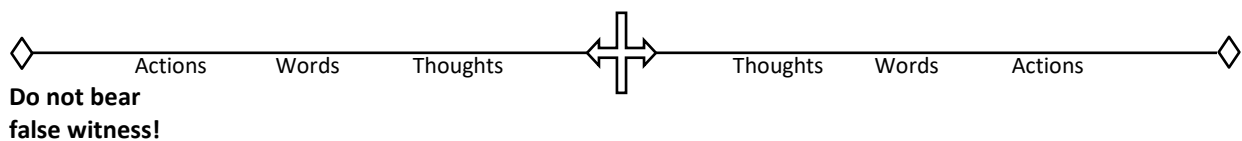
Stealing involves property. It is making a claim on something that is not rightly mine to claim. The claim begins with desiring and taking in the mind. Then it moves into words, voicing a claim on something that does not belong to me. It ends up with the action of stealing. Stealing takes a range of forms, taking property from a person or from a store, pirating software or music, cheating on taxes, taking supplies from the workplace without asking, not returning money when you notice a clerk has given you the wrong change. Simply put, taking what is not legally yours is stealing.

Turing out backs on that, what would you say is the positive opposite of “Do not steal?”

If you said, “Give,” I agree. I like how Paul states it in Ephesians 4:28,

He who steals must steal no longer; but rather he must labor, performing with his own hands what is good, so that he will have *something* to share with one who has need.

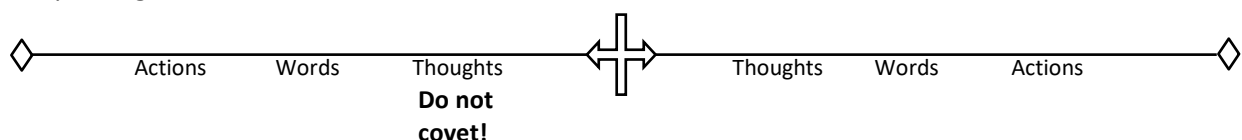
Giving begins in the mind when we consider ourselves as a steward. What I have has been given to me by God to use in taking care of my family, in building his kingdom, and in caring for people in need. We think in our minds how to help people in need. We advocate with our words. And we give from our own property. We work, in part, so that we might give.



The next command “Do not bear false witness.” often gets shortened to “Do not lie.” The commandment is more specific than that. “Do not bear false witness” commands against providing false statements in a court of law. As we look down the negative direction of the continuum to that extreme act of standing up in court and lying falsely to the harm of someone else, we can imagine other steps along the way, like lying to a neighbor or parent or teacher or speaking falsely about God.

If the negative extreme is lying as a witness, then we might consider the positive extreme as speaking the truth when called to witness. But the positive side requires a positive moral action. It is not only speaking truth when required by law to do so but taking the initiative to speak up even when not required to do so. And it includes speaking the truth for the sake of justice even when it brings opposition or persecution.

I like God’s words to Paul when he faced opposition in Corinth. I think they go well with this command, the positive aspect of this command. God told Paul in Acts 18:9, “Do not be afraid, but go on speaking and do not be silent.”



Our final commandment, the fifth for this lesson, but the tenth overall, is unique among all the commandments. “Do not covet” is a command of the heart and mind. It is not enforceable in the civil code. It points to the higher call to morality that we have been considering. Not only does God hold individuals accountable for murder, adultery, theft or false witness, all outward actions that can be opposed by a written legal code, but God also held those living under the Old Covenant accountable

to internal morality. We see that with love the Lord you God will all your heart, mind, soul and strength. We see that with love your neighbor. We are accountable to that inward reality that leads to outward action. And we also see it here in the ten commandments with do not covet.

This is a longer law. Let's read it in full, Deuteronomy 5:21,

You shall not covet your neighbor's wife, and you shall not desire your neighbor's house, his field or his male servant or his female servant, his ox or his donkey or anything that belongs to your neighbor.

To covet is to desire for yourself what does not belong to you. We can imagine the heart of coveting at the beginning of each of the other negative continuums. It is not the only heart motive that leads to wrong action, but it is a very common heart motive. Why does the man murder or commit adultery or steal or stand up to bear false witness? All too often, he does so out of a coveting heart. It is a primary motive of the human heart, a corruption of the human heart that leads to other sins. Man wants something that is not his. Think of King David. What heart motive lead him to the sins of adultery and murder and false witness?

When we turn our backs on coveting and turn towards the positive side of the continuum, we turn towards thankfulness, a heart of gratitude. If my heart is full of gratitude for what God has given me, then I am not focused on what I do not have. So, that's got us faced in the right direction, gratitude or thankfulness. But what is that positive opposite on the extreme positive side of "Do not covet?" I think of Romans 12:15, "Rejoice with those who rejoice." And my wife Brenda is my model for this.

If you were ever to come and tell me that you had just won an all expense paid trip to Hawaii for your whole family, I know exactly what my initial thought would be. "I want that. I want to go to Hawaii. Why don't I ever get free stuff like that?" Brenda's first response would be to jump up and down with you in excitement over the fact that you are going to Hawaii for free. She is not thinking about herself at all. She is rejoicing with you. Not only are we called to be thankful and satisfied with what we have, even further, we are called to rejoice with others for the blessings that they have received

Conclusion

We are at the end. That was the last of the ten commandments. Let's sum up the moral vision of Jesus.

One of the challenges in sharing the gospel with other people is that non-Christians hear grace as freedom to sin, whereas, Christians hear grace as freedom from sin. The difference when we think about our continuum is that the sinful heart wants to get as close as possible to the sin side without crossing the line, while the heart that seeks God, turns its back on sin and heads in the other direction, seeing the pursuit of good as equivalent to the pursuit of life.

One of the reasons that this is so hard to explain to people, is that true faith is not merely intellectual assent. True faith requires God to do something in your heart. True faith is spiritual insight that comes from an opening of the eyes of your heart. When God opens the eyes of your heart, you begin to see things differently. So, when we look down the path towards murder and adultery and theft and false witness, covetousness, we begin to see broken and damaged relationships, emptiness, corruption, and death. Faith moves us to turn our backs on that death and to instead fix our eyes on Jesus. We are looking straight towards him. Our minds are being transformed to understand the moral vision of Christ. We are beginning to see that morality is not a standard by which we earn salvation or by which we are judged as Christians. Morality is God's vision of human life. Do you want to experience the abundant life that Jesus has promised, then obey the commandments out of a heart of love for God. The commandments do not point you along a narrow way by which you earn approval. The commandments point you along a narrow way by which you experience healing, fulfillment, life, Jesus. We are not turning our faces towards a moral standard. We are turning our faces towards life itself. We are fixing our eyes on Jesus and pursuing him, his way.

Reflection Questions

1. Read the ten commandments listed in Deuteronomy 5:1-21. What stands out to you as interesting or confusing or important or strange?
2. Notice how the command "Do not covet," stands out as different from the other commands. Why do you think this command of the heart is listed along with the other nine? What might be a possible reason?
3. Read Matthew 5:21-48. What stands out to you as interesting or confusing or important or strange?
4. Draw a continuum line with "Do not murder" at one end and "Lay down your life" at the other. List above the line moving from the center to the left "Thoughts," "Words," and "Actions." And then from the center to the right, "Thoughts," "Words," and "Actions." Then come up with a couple of examples for each heading both going down the negative side of the continuum, what are a couple of negative thoughts, a couple of negative words, a couple of negative actions that lie on the negative side toward murder. And then do the same for thoughts, words and actions on the positive side towards laying down your life. Use examples true to your own life. How has showing contempt worked out negatively in you? And how has giving life worked out positively in you?
If you are in a group, discuss your answers with one another.
5. Do the same for a continuum line with "Do not commit adultery?"
6. If you have time, you can also try one or more of the remaining three commandments.
7. How would you describe the difference between trying to get right up as close to the sin side as possible versus turning your back on the sin side and pursuing life? Is that a helpful image or distinction for you? Why or why not?

Lesson 27: Deuteronomy 5.1-16 Ten Commandments - Love God

Introduction

This is our second lesson focusing on the ten commandments. The list in Deuteronomy comes in 5:7-21. Here are the six verses that come before that. This is 5:1-6.

¹ Then Moses summoned all Israel and said to them: “Hear, O Israel, the statutes and the ordinances which I am speaking today in your hearing, that you may learn them and observe them carefully. ² The Lord our God made a covenant with us at Horeb. ³ The Lord did not make this covenant with our fathers, but with us, *with* all those of us alive here today. ⁴ The Lord spoke to you face to face at the mountain from the midst of the fire, ⁵ *while* I was standing between the Lord and you at that time, to declare to you the word of the Lord; for you were afraid because of the fire and did not go up the mountain. He said, ⁶ ‘I am the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.’

Deuteronomy is a series of speeches from Moses to the second generation out of Egypt. He calls out here to that generation, “Hear, O Israel, the statutes and the ordinances which I am speaking to you today in your hearing, that you may learn them and observe them carefully.” It is a call to obedience.

This generation desperately needs to know who their God is, who they are, and what their mission is. That mission is to go take the land of Canaan. The sin of the Amorites has boiled over for 400 years. The time of their judgement has come. The time for Israel is now. But the mission is not only to enter the land and then live however they will, just as the people of that land have done for centuries. Israel has a moral mission. They are to be a kingdom of priests. They are to live out the will of God. They are to be a light for the surrounding peoples. They are to be a blessing to the nations.

In bringing this challenge to this generation, Moses says, “The Lord our God made a covenant with us at Horeb [which is another name for Mt. Sinai]. The Lord did not make this covenant with our fathers, but with us, with all those of us alive here today.” That is an interesting declaration. God did make this covenant with their fathers. And all of this generation less than 40 years old were not yet born. Moses is not rewriting history. Moses is emphasizing to this generation that the covenant does not stop with the fathers. The covenant was not just for the fathers. The covenant applies to the generation that is alive right now. This is their history, their story, their present reality, they are the ones that must decide, “Do we own this covenant ourselves? Is this our covenant?”

Moses reminds them that God spoke on that mountain. The living God spoke to us. And Moses reminds them of the fear that people felt. And that he served as their mediator. He mediated, but the words of the law are God’s words. Our God is the God who speaks. Our God is the God who reveals himself who teaches us who he is, who we are, and how to live out the mission.

The moral vision of the ten commandment continues on to those of us who are now under the new covenant. We are the generation alive now. And Jesus, not Moses, has called us to love the Lord God by living in obedience to his commandments.

So, we are taking a closer look at the ten commandments. We started with commandments 6-10 in our last lesson. We turn to commandments 1-5 in this lesson.

The Numbering of the Ten Commandments

There is debate among various Jewish and Christian traditions on how to order the ten commandments, which commandments are 1-10?

The first potential difference comes from the Jewish Talmud which takes Deuteronomy 5:6 as commandment number 1, “I am the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.” While taking this as the first commandment has the advantage of emphasizing the importance of this verse, an understanding of ancient near-eastern treaties indicates that verse 6 is better understood as a very brief covenant title and covenant prologue that proceed the covenant

stipulations. The title, “I am the Lord your God” (I am Yahweh, Elohim.) is followed by the short history or short prologue “who brought you up out of the land of Egypt.”

Verse 7 is written as an imperative in a form you would expect of the first covenant stipulation. “You shall have no other gods before Me.” That is the first actual command.

Another difference between traditions occurs with the decision of whether to understand verses 8-10 as part of verse 7 or as two separate commandments. Following Augustine, the Roman Catholic Church and Martin Luther understood these verses to be one long command. “You shall have no other Gods before me,” includes then, “You shall not make for yourself an idol.”

Combining these two commandments into one is going to leave us with only nine commandments. That brings us to a third difference. The typical way to still have ten commandments is to separate verse 21 into two different prohibitions against coveting. The ninth commandment becomes, “You shall not covet your neighbor’s wife.” And the tenth commandment becomes, “You shall not covet your neighbor’s stuff.” “Stuff” is my summary for house, field, servants, ox, donkey, “or anything else that belongs to your neighbor.”

A major problem of separating coveting into two commandments comes when you look back at the wording of the same commandment in Exodus 20:17, the version given at Mt. Sinai, which does not start with coveting your neighbor’s wife. It starts with coveting your neighbor’s house, then wife, then possessions. This difference suggests that the prohibition really is against coveting and the list provides examples that can be ordered in different ways without changing the basic intent of the command. But if we do not divide coveting into two commandments then we also cannot group “no other gods” and “no idols.”

So, I am going with the numbering system recommended by the Septuagint, the Jewish scholar Philo, and later by John Calvin. This is the list most Protestants are aware of. And I think this numbering system fits best the biblical text. The commands, in summary form, are this,

1. Have no other gods before me.
2. Make no idols.
3. Do not take God’s name in vain.
4. Keep the Sabbath.
5. Honor your parents.
6. Do not murder.
7. Do not commit adultery.
8. Do not steal.
9. Do not bear false witness.
10. Do not covet.

We covered the second five in our previous lesson. We are covering the first five in this lesson. And we are looking at these ten commandments as a summary of the whole law, or as a paradigm for the moral law of God. Jesus summed up the whole not with ten commandments but with just two commandments. “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind (Matthew 22:37).” And “You shall love your neighbor as yourself (Matthew 22:39).” But these two commandments aren’t original in Matthew. Jesus quoted from the Pentateuch. The greatest commandment to love your God comes in our very next chapter right after the ten commandments. It is in Deuteronomy 6:5. And the command to love your neighbor comes from the moral holiness code in Leviticus 19:18.

These two commands sum up the whole of Torah. So, they must also sum up the summary of Torah. These two commandments sum up the ten commandments. And we see that fairly clearly. The first five commandments have to do with our vertical relationship with God. Love your God. How? First, by keeping these commandments. The last five commandments focus on our horizontal relationships with people. Love your neighbor. How? Well, by keeping these commandments.

We also recognized in our previous lesson that the keeping of those commandments, the last five that we addressed, does not appear that difficult at first. No murder, no adultery, no stealing, no lying in a court of law, and if we ignore the last one, we're good. But when we recognize that Torah law works both at the level of civil law, setting a lower bar, and also at the level of moral perfection, setting a very high bar, then we are forced to consider the ten commandments more closely. We took our cue in that last lesson from Jesus' Sermon on the Mount recording in Matthew 5-7. Jesus is not at all anti-law. Towards the beginning of the sermon in Matthew 5:17 Jesus declared, "Do not think that I came to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I did not come to abolish but to fulfill." Then towards the end of the sermon in Matthew 7:12 Jesus says, "In everything, therefore, treat people the same way you want them to treat you, for this is the Law and the Prophets."

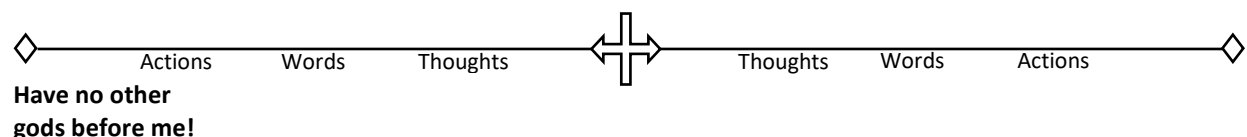
Jesus teaches us that the moral vision of the mosaic covenant flows right into the moral vision of the new covenant. And Jesus takes us into a closer look at the commandments, so that we can see with each commandment there is a moral continuum at work. It is like standing on a path and you can choose to turn in one direction or the other and you can move along that path towards one extreme or you can move along towards another extreme. Physically taking someone's life is the negative extreme of the command, "Do not murder." But Jesus teaches us that as soon as we move down the path in that direction in our mind, as soon as we begin to hate or embrace contempt for the life of another person, we are responsible for having committed murder. The path is a continuum towards the extreme action, a continuum that starts in the mind, and then it moves out to words, and then out to actions and then can end in something very extreme like actual murder.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus focused on identifying the sinful direction of the path. But understanding the other teachings of Jesus, we recognize that he is not just calling us to not do bad stuff. He is calling us to turn our backs on sin and death and to head the other way, in the positive direction. We are to fix our eyes on Jesus at the end of the path in the good direction. At the extreme positive end of that path we see this vision of a person who loves another so much that he would be willing to lay down his own life to protect or care for the life of another person. And that is the opposite of murder. And that is Jesus. That is exactly who Jesus is. The positive moral direction is also a continuum of protecting and giving life. It is not just an extreme event. But it is through our thoughts and through our words and through our actions that we are engaged in this positive moral command to give life to others.

So, in our previous lesson, we considered how the last five commandments all operate as a continuum or as a path. And we can choose to walk away from Jesus or towards Jesus. Those commandments give us a paradigm, a moral vision, for how we love our neighbor as ourself. This is what that looks like. This is how we fulfill the second great commandment.

And that teaching of Jesus has set up our model for how to interpret all of the ten commandments. So, now we are ready to turn to the first five commandments and to consider our relationship with God. How do we fulfill the first great commandment?

The Ten Commandments as a Moral Paradigm – Love God.



This is the first commandment, "You shall have no other gods before me." So, standing on the path, and turning to look down to that far end, we see a plethora of gods calling for our allegiance and worship, offering us identity, power, pleasure, and security. But we are told, "You shall have no other gods before me."

Let's think about what that means in the original context, "No other gods before me." In the ancient near east, the standard worldview adopted by every nation surrounding Israel included a primary

god as king with a pantheon of lesser gods surrounding that god. Whatever his name, whether it was Amun-Ra or Ashur or Marduk or Baal, the king of the gods sat on the throne and the other gods stood before that king as the royal court. The wording of this first commandment forbids the setting up of any pantheon to go along with Yahweh. So, it is not necessarily putting up other gods before God means a complete rejection of Yahweh, but it means establishing this whole pantheon of gods that we can go to, this whole plethora of sources that we can seek to fulfill our needs. Yahweh may be king, but we have set up this pantheon of gods surrounding him, that stand before him.

The Bible gives us a truly unique and counter-cultural vision of worship. In Deuteronomy 6:4 Moses calls out, "Hear, O Israel The Lord is our God, the Lord is one," just one, not a plethora. And in Deuteronomy 4:35, speaking about God's might in delivering Israel from Egypt, Moses tells the Israelites, "To you it was shown that you might know that the Lord, He is God; there is no other besides Him." To make the point clear, Moses says again four verses later in 4:39, "Know therefore today, and take it to your heart, that the Lord, He is God in heaven above and on the earth below; there is no other." Moses needed to make that clear. The oneness of God, the uniqueness of God is completely countercultural to the typical ancient worldview that assumes a plurality of gods. There are other spiritual beings to be sure, demons and angels. But there are no other gods. There is only one God.

This basic command has begun to run counter-cultural to much of modern or post-modern Western thought which really has begun to embrace pluralism. That everybody can have their own god. And now it is not so much a belief objectively in a plethora of gods, but God is understood to be subjective. We create the gods with our minds. Truth is subjective. Everybody has their own vision of God. All of those visions are right. You can set up a whole pantheon of spiritual beings and nobody can say that anybody is wrong. But God is not a creation of the human mind. That is completely false. God is not subjective. God is real. And God is one. And there is no other.

Standing on the path looking down towards all these gods who would gather around the one true creator God as lesser options, we may not bow down in worship or claim allegiance outright to some particular god. But this path too is a continuum. We can move down this path in our thoughts, in our words, in our actions in a variety of ways before actually coming to the point of open allegiance to another god.

It starts in the mind with doubts and questions regarding the goodness of God. "Is he really good? Does he really care? Is he really unique? Is this really the way for me to get what I want out of life? To get pleasure or have security? Is God the only way?" These questions and concerns pop into our minds quite naturally, sometimes as just really good, honest questions, sometimes motivated by our sin nature, sometimes encouraged by Satan, sometimes coming at us from our culture. It can be hard to unpack where the questions come from. Whether the source of the questions is good or bad, what we do with those questions determines whether or not we are moving down the path towards other gods. Our orientation matters a lot. Do I have my eyes fixed on Jesus? I am doubting and questioning, but I am fixing my eyes on Jesus. Am I seeking the kingdom of God? Am I trying to find answers to my questions in him? Or am I beginning to walk away from God? Am I accepting other cultural answers or other gods or other sources of power?

And when I begin to seek other sources for that which is meant to come only from God or primarily from God, then I have begun down the road towards other gods. When I seek pleasure outside of the good pleasure God has designed for me, then I am seeking another god. When I seek to define my basic identity through relationship with another person or entity other than God, then I am seeking another god. When I give adoration and worship somewhere else, I am seeking another god. When I am looking for someone else to answer my prayers or make me secure or to give me power or to provide success, then I am seeking other gods.

The best way to resist the temptation of our hearts away from God is to turn towards God. With all our cares and our anxieties and our questions, we turn to face him, to pursue him. We can ask,

“What is the positive opposite?” What is our goal? What are we aiming for as we turn up the path towards God? And in this case, with the first commandment, it is the greatest commandment. The positive opposite of seeking out other gods is this, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.”

And it is not a standard we can reach. We can go ahead and admit that right now. You are not going to love God with all your heart or with all your soul or with all your might. If you can achieve it for seconds or minutes that’s great, that’s awesome. And I mean you are not going to achieve it here before heaven. But we pursue it. And we grow in it. This is a vision we can reach towards. It is a good we can run after. God wants all of who we are. That makes sense. He does not want lip service. He does not want us to play religion. He does not want legalistic obedience. He wants us to pursue him with heart and with soul and with might. We worship and adore God with our thoughts, with our words, and with our actions. We are pursuing this path. God and the good things he gives that’s what we seek to fill our souls.

Why does God demand this primary place in our lives? Why is he so exclusive? Why is this the first and greatest moral commandment? Here are two thoughts.

One, God is the greatest good. He himself is the definition of good. Pursuit of good is pursuit of God. The two cannot be separated. God cannot encourage us to give our primary allegiance elsewhere. That would not be good. That would be God encouraging us to turn away from good. God is unique in this. God is the one being in all creation who ought to call out for his own praise, because he truly is the center of all good. If God is going to praise that which is most good, God actually must praise himself. He must care about his own glory. It is not right for me to seek my own glory. It is absolutely right for God to seek his own glory. And it is right for him to call all creation to recognize his glory and give him praise.

A moral vision without God is an immoral vision.

Two, the only way for me to truly live as the moral creature I was created to be is to do so in relationship with God. I cannot live out the moral vision of loving my neighbor, if I am not living out the moral vision of loving my God. As a human, I have been created in the image of God, to reflect the glory of his nature. I cannot do this separated from God. I was not made – even without having fallen into sin – I was created to be filled by my God and to walk with him and be filled by him. I do not mean that I cannot do any good separated from God. All people are created in God’s image and able in moments to do acts of compassion and justice and kindness. But to truly address the selfishness of my own heart and mind, the pollution of my soul, to truly understand what is just and loving and pure and good, to be able to speak truth in love, to be in a process of transformation, to become whole, to have power to act in love, for all of these things I am dependent on relationship with God. I can’t be the moral being I have been created to be if I am not in relationship with God. It cannot happen. I could summarize it with these three things, (1) to grow in my understanding of God and of what is good; (2) to be changed in my desires for good; (3) and to have power to enact the good that I know I ought to do; all of these, understanding, transformation, and power all of these require that I am in an ongoing relationship with my Creator.

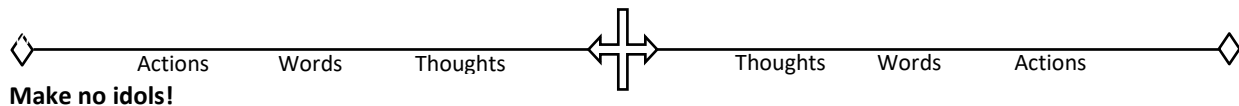
A moral vision without God is a skewed and impotent vision.

It is good and right and necessary for God to call every one of us into a full-on relationship with him. We can only be who God created us to be as human beings by growing in our pursuit of him with all of our heart and soul and strength. This is life. This is what it is to be human, a pursuit of God.

And we do not first love him. God first loves us. We respond in love to him. And in that relationship, we are then enabled to truly love people.

This command must stand first. That you will have no other god, but the one true God, and you will love him with all that you have.

Let’s move on to commandment number two, “Make no idols.”



This commandment is longer, so let's read the text from Deuteronomy 5:8-10.

⁸ You shall not make for yourself an idol, *or* any likeness of what is in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the water under the earth. ⁹ You shall not worship them or serve them; for I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children, and on the third and the fourth *generations* of those who hate Me, ¹⁰ but showing lovingkindness to thousands, to those who love Me and keep My commandments.

We can see why this commandment has sometimes been counted as an aspect of the first commandment. Making an idol of some created thing, whether the sun or moon or eagle in heaven, whether bull or snake or human on earth, whether fish of any kind in the water, can be understood as a violation of the extreme negative of the first command to have no other gods. When you have actually made an idol in the shape of some created thing, you have certainly committed yourself to some other god. You have violated the first commandment.

But it is also helpful for us to think about the difference between the two commands. The first command considers our allegiance to other gods. The second command considers the definition, even the creation of false gods.

During our study of the Pentateuch, we have recognized two types of idolatry. One type of idolatry involves a turning away from God to other sources of power. The goat demons in Leviticus 17 represented this type of idolatry. Chapter 4 here in Deuteronomy focuses on this type of idolatry. There is a repeated call for Israel to remember God who spoke at Mt. Sinai and to resist the pull to go over to the gods of Canaan. Do not let society define for you or help you define sources of worship and power and identity and pleasure. Listen to God who spoke to you. Seek your definition of life in him. Don't go after that type of idolatry.

The other type of idolatry was exemplified through the making of the golden calf. This is making an idol of Yahweh. So, this isn't really a turning from Yahweh. This is a recreating of Yahweh. And this happens when we create a physical form for God, like the calf. It also happens when we make a conceptual form of God for our minds, like when we highlight specific aspects of God without mention of other aspects of God, whether we make God a god of justice without compassion or a god of mercy without wrath. Both are false conceptions of the God revealed in the Bible. When Jesus is conceived only as a lamb never as a lion or the other way around, then we are beginning down the road of idolatry when we form in our minds a conception of God that is not true to his nature as he has expressed it in his word.

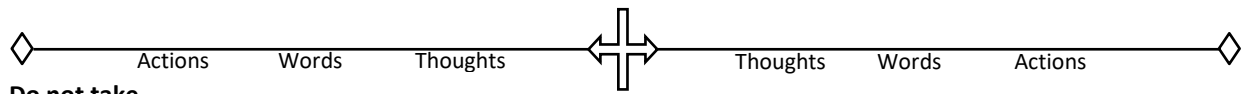
Considering this golden calf type of idolatry that would make an idol and call it Yahweh, what would the opposite positive action be for us? When we turn our back on this kind of idolatry, what are we pursuing? I like what Jesus says to the Samaritan woman in John 4:24, "God is spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth."

Pursuing God with our heart, soul and might requires that we seek the God who truly is not the God we would create ourselves. To seek God in truth requires that we allow God to define himself for us, to reveal himself to us in his word, not primarily through our experience. We may experience God, but we have to understand that experience through his word.

This idea of allowing God to reveal himself comes out in the wording of the commandment. You may have heard his name from Exodus 34:6-7.

⁹ You shall not worship them or serve them; for I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children, and on the third and the fourth *generations* of those who hate Me, ¹⁰ but showing lovingkindness to thousands, to those who love Me and keep My commandments.

We are getting the idea of God's just wrath right beside his overwhelming loving kindness. We love God by rejection other gods and by rejecting our own definition of who god is. We love God by seeking the truth about him, according to how he has revealed himself, even when that revelation runs counter to our own tradition or our own conception or our own desire.



In the third commandment we are told not to take God's name in vain. I used to think this simply meant, "Don't use God's name when you cuss." I do not think that is what this means. At least not in the way most people cuss. If someone says, "God damn you," they are probably not seriously thinking about God or about you being damned by God. But that's where the phrase comes from. It is a curse, a prayer to God, asking God to close the doors of heaven on you, that you would be eternally damned. "God damn you." It is not cussing. It is cursing. It is calling a curse on you.

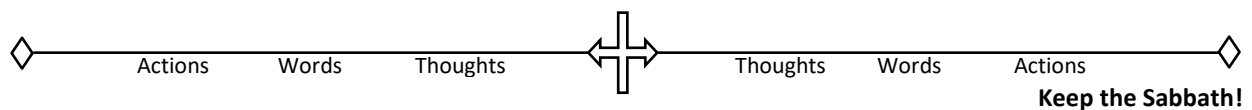
Taking God's name in vain has to do with the use of God's name for a human being's own, personal gain, whether we are calling for curse on someone else or blessing for ourselves. When we view God as a power source that we can manipulate, we are taking his name in vain. If we think that adding the name of Jesus to the end of a prayer in the right formulaic mix somehow compels God to act, then our prayer is the prayer of the occult. It is magic. If we think we have the ability to cause God to act or harness the power of God or manipulate God, if you just pray in a certain way or worship in a certain way or repeat things in a certain way or imagine things in a certain way, you just name it and claim it, then you are using God as a power source to get what you want. And that is magic. That is not prayer.

Prayer is not a formula by which we control God. And it is easy to slip into as Christians. And sometimes I think there is just some honest childlike prayer that might sound like that, but it is not manipulative. I am not talking about that. God has told us to pray about all things. And he has told us that when we pray in the name of Jesus, we will receive what we have asked for. But that is an idea that needs some time to unpack. And we do not have time to unpack all of that right now. What I will say is that praying in the name of Jesus does not mean using the right name as part of a formula. The name of Jesus is the character of Jesus. Remember the name of God in Exodus 34:6 that we have talked about so often and the name "I am" in Exodus 4 and other various names of God we have encountered through the Pentateuch. Those names have been revealing to us who God is. His name reveals his character, reveals his justice, his compassion, that he is creator and provider, he is self-existent, he is the one willing to speak to man. Praying in the name of Jesus has to do, not just using the name when we end the prayer, you know, "I pray this in the name of Jesus." It has to do with praying according to who Jesus is, knowing the character of Jesus and praying in line with the character and will of Jesus.

Prayer is not fundamentally formulaic. That is one of the reasons prayer gets so boring. Prayer is fundamentally relational. When we pray, we ask. We do not demand. God is our Father who wants to hear every desire of our heart. But in the lifting up of those desires, things happen. When we come to God and lift up our desires, sometimes he changes our hearts. When we look to him our desires have a way of readjusting. When we take our eyes off the storm of life and look at Jesus, sometimes we forget what we were going to request. Sometimes when we look at God, we do not receive relief, but we receive strength. We experience him walking with us through the suffering. And then at other times, he grants our request directly. However God chooses to answer, prayer is fundamentally relational, an entering into conversation with God about our needs and desires and dreams and struggles.

In the relational communication that is prayer, we acknowledge that God is Father and King and Lord. Those are all authority relationships. We are under his authority. So, whenever we request anything, we submit to the rightness and goodness of God. We trust him to make the call to grant or deny any request. We trust him in that. He does not exist to answer our requests. That's a genie. That's not God. We exist to be in relationship with him and prayer is a means by which we enjoy that relationship.

So, when we turn our back on that kind of prayer or oath that is taking God's name in vain, that is simply manipulation or formulaic prayer, that expects sort of this magical response if I can just use the name right, then I am going to get what I want. When we turn away from that, what are we turning towards? What is our vision for true prayer? I like Jesus' prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane, "My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me; yet not as I will, but as you will (Matthew 26:39)." Or we could go with, "Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy will be done." We make request, but we submit that request fully to the will of God.



The fourth and fifth commandments take on a different form than the other eight commandments. Instead of telling us what we should not do, both of these tell us what we should do. So, we start with the positive side of the moral continuum and then we have to try to imagine what would the opposite be. The positive fourth commandment is "Keep the Sabbath." That is a positive something that we are supposed to do. So, if we are going in the right direction, we are keeping the Sabbath. It is the longest commandment. So, let's read it, Deuteronomy 5:12-15,

¹² Observe the Sabbath day to keep it holy, as the Lord your God commanded you. ¹³ Six days you shall labor and do all your work, ¹⁴ but the seventh day is a Sabbath of the Lord your God; *in it* you shall not do any work, you or your son or your daughter or your male servant or your female servant or your ox or your donkey or any of your cattle or your sojourner who stays with you, so that your male servant and your female servant may rest as well as you. ¹⁵ You shall remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the Lord your God brought you out of there by a mighty hand and by an outstretched arm; therefore the Lord your God commanded you to observe the Sabbath day.

In the civil form, this is an ordering of Israelite society. And it is providing rest and care for laborers. And it is giving structure to their weeks and months and their seasons and their years. Christians debate on whether this commandment still applies and if it does, what does it mean. I would need a whole lesson to get into that debate. I'll just indicate a couple of important factors. On the one hand, the Sabbath is connected to the Mosaic covenant as a sign, that is in Exodus 31 and again in Exodus 35 when covenant is renewed after the sin of the golden calf. So, it is important enough to say both times. The wording God uses in Exodus 31:17 is that the Sabbath "is a sign between me and the sons of Israel forever." And that wording that it is a "sign" and that is with "Israel" and that it is "forever" connects us back to Genesis 17 when God gave Abraham the covenant sign of circumcision. As a covenant sign for the Mosaic covenant, it makes sense that we who are in the new covenant are not bound to this sign in the way it was practiced under the previous covenant. Circumcision was the sign of the abrahamic covenant, and it was expressly commanded again under the mosaic covenant. Sabbath was the sign of the mosaic covenant, but it is not expressly commanded again under the new covenant.

On the other hand, the idea of Sabbath goes all the way back past mosaic covenant, past Abrahamic covenant to the creation, and that does at least raise the question of the debate on whether or not this should be practiced through all covenants.

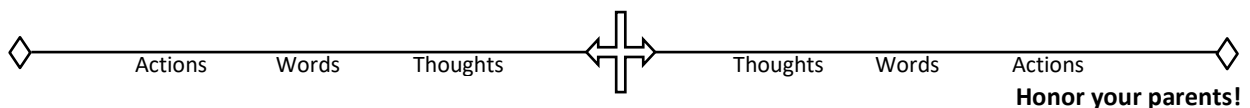
Personally, I do not believe we are bound to practice Sabbath as commanded in the mosaic law. I think the ceremonial and civil and pedagogical functions of Sabbath are fulfilled in Jesus. I do not see the Sabbath commandment repeated in the new covenant as are other commandments, and we have to consider the Sabbath rest language in Hebrews chapters 3 and 4 which suggests that Jesus Christ has provided for us a new form of Sabbath rest. We still have Sabbath rest, but it is not the Sabbath day. Hebrews 4:10 tells us, "The one who has entered His rest has himself also rested from his works, as God did from His."

So, for understanding this commandment as part of our moral paradigm, we can focus on this idea of Sabbath rest as dependence on God. So, I am going to leave aside for the moment the question, the civil, ceremonial, moral question of whether actually not working on a particular day is required. And instead I am going to focus on this idea that really comes out in Hebrews that is behind the commandment. That there was this day that was commanded in order for Israel to express a spiritual state of trust and dependence. So, whether or not the outward commands are still required of us as new covenant believers, we can focus on the inward command of dependence and rest in God.

For most of time, most of human society has worked in agriculture. That was certainly true through the whole Old Testament period. To not work on Sunday during time of harvest truly required trusting God that rain or frost would not destroy those crops that are sitting out there waiting to be brought in. It is going to have to wait until after Sabbath day. God is saying, "Trust me with the fruit of your labor. Do you really need to work on Sunday?" He is also saying, "Make me a priority. Recognize that you are not in control. And that you need time with me." Sabbath rest is displayed by giving regular priority to our relationship with God, being willing to take off from our struggles and our pursuits.

Sabbath rest is also a call to inner peace that comes from trusting God with life. Jesus said, "Do not be anxious for your life, as to what you shall eat, or what you shall drink; nor for your body, as to what you shall put on....seek first his kingdom and his righteousness and all these things will be added to you." Seeking first God's kingdom does not mean busy, busy, busy for God all the time. We are called to stop, to rest, to sit at his feet, to put our plans and strategies in his hands.

I like how the NASB translates Psalm 46:10 as a negative extreme for this command. So, opposite to "Keep Sabbath," is this command to "Cease striving." Just stop. Stop. Rest in God. Do not depend on your labor. "Cease striving and know that I am God."



The command is not given to the parents but to the children. God establishes for us the importance of family, even broken family. God's moral vision for us as human beings involves giving honor to our parents. This is right and good. And the command is not to give honor to good parents or successful parents or even caring parents. The commandment is simply to honor your parents. This is good and right for you that you honor the parents God has given you.

That does not mean that you validate or enable the brokenness or sin of your parents. At some point in life we must take parents off the pedestal and recognize them as human beings created in the image of God who have tried or who have not tried. They are fallen just like the rest of us.

Honor is also not equivalent with obedience. It is when you are a child. Obedience is part of the right relationship between parents and children, because parents are at that stage rightly the authority over the children. I think you continue to obey as you transition to adulthood and are still dependent financially on your parents. Ideally parents are helping you make the transition to adult responsibility. But regardless of how well they are doing, you obey as long as you are dependent on them for food and shelter, unless they are asking you to directly disobey the moral commands of God. That would be a situation you would rightly disobey. Otherwise, if you are living in their home, you obey. Their house, their rules. That is what honoring your parents looks like.

When you get married or move out on your own as a dependent single person, you continue to honor, but are no longer under your parents' authority, so honor does not include obedience. This is a pattern God gave from the beginning. Genesis 2:24 states, "For this reason a man shall leave his father and his mother, and be joined to his wife; and they shall become one flesh." A new family has begun. They have left father and mother. And now there is a new family with a new authority structure. To honor in this context of this new reality with a new family means to respect and to speak well of, to care for but not necessarily to obey. That is unless you did not leave father and mother but are still living under their roof as a new family and that gets messy.

The opposite of the command to honor could be "Do not curse." Parental frustration brings out the temptation to curse our parents. When our parents fail us or hurt us or restrict us, we want to lash out or speak harshly. Love can turn to hate. But hate binds and hate corrodes. Proverbs 20:20 teaches us,

He who curses his father or his mother,
his lamp will go out in time of darkness.

Whatever your particular case may be "Honor your parents" is not a suggestion. It is a commandment from your heavenly Father. It is part of his vision for you to continue to grow as a whole person. And it was the one commandment given with a promise.

¹⁶ Honor your father and your mother, as the Lord your God has commanded you, that your days may be prolonged and that it may go well with you on the land which the Lord your God gives you.

God's plan for healthy people and a healthy society begins in the home with a mother and a father who teach their children to obey the commandments, to love God with their heart and mind, to seek God as he is in spirit and in truth, to trust God in prayer, and to find rest in dependent relationship with God.

God is calling us to abundant life. He is calling us to walk with him on the path, fixing our eyes on Jesus and pursuing him through a life of obedience to his commandments.

As Jesus taught us in John 14:21,

"He who has My commandments and keeps them is the one who loves Me; and he who loves Me will be loved by My Father, and I will love him and will disclose Myself to him."

Reflection Questions

1. Read again Deuteronomy 5:1-22. What stands out to you this time as interesting, strange, important or confusing?
2. Is it possible to be a good and moral person, loving your neighbor, according to the moral vision of Jesus, without committing yourself to loving God? Why or why not?
3. We have addressed idolatry often in this Pentateuch series. Culturally, the ancient Israelites could easily claim faithfulness to Yahweh as king of Israel while still seeking out other gods. That is the way their world works. Yahweh is the main God, but you go elsewhere, too, to meet your needs and get things done. Thinking about idolatry as an issue of the heart, what are some major sources that people turn to apart from God as sources of security, identity, worth, pleasure, or healing? Think about this question in terms of the various age groups in your community. What might be common to all and what might be more specific to age? (If you just don't know, guess. But then go ask one or two from that age group what they think.)
 - a. What idols pull the hearts of teenagers and 20-somethings away from God?
 - b. What idols pull the hearts of those in their 30s and 40s?
 - c. What idols pull the hearts of those in their 50s and 60s?
 - d. What idols pull the hearts of those in their 70s and older?
4. Question number 3 addresses more the first commandment and the allegiance of our heart. Consider the question the second commandment and the definition of God. What are three or four ways your society defines God that may draw a little from the Bible, but is skewed and is not a seeking to know God as he reveals himself?
5. How would you describe in your own words what it means to take God's name in vain? Do you ever fall into the habit of praying a formula or trying to move God with the right words or the right approach? How does relational prayer differ from formulaic prayer?
6. How do you keep the Sabbath? How do you show dependence on God by carving out time to rest from your business and focus on relationship? If you were to improve this aspect of your life, what is one possible step you could take?
7. How do you show honor to your parents? What is one way you could improve in this area of pursuing God?
8. Why do you think the command to honor parents comes with the promise of long life in the land?

Lesson 28: Deuteronomy 27-30 Listen and Love and Live**Introduction**

| Deuteronomy: Kingdom Renewal | | | | |
|-------------------------------|------------------------------------|-----------------------------------|-------------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| Key Passage: 6:4-5 | | | | |
| A | B | X | B' | A' |
| 1-3
Historical
prologue | 4-11
Theological
exhortation | 12-26
Covenant
stipulations | 27-30
Theological
exhortation | 31-34
Historic
transition |

Listen, love, live. Moving on to Deuteronomy 27-30, I want to focus on the call to life that Moses develops in these chapters. We have considered the call to listen, which is to hear, to obey. And we have considered the call to love God. The two are connected. If we truly love God, we will desire to hear and obey, that is the right response to the wonder and gratitude we should have as human beings in the worship of our holy and gracious creator God. Morality is not a standard we must meet to be declared righteous and acceptable. We could never meet such a standard. We are accepted by grace. Morality is God's vision of a truly good and honorable life. And we live out that vision as a response of wonder and gratitude.

This is how we have covered Deuteronomy up to this point. In our first lesson, we recognized the style of Deuteronomy as a series of speeches from Moses to this second generation out of Egypt. We also recognized the form of Deuteronomy begin based on a 2nd millennium suzerain-vasal treaty. Deuteronomy is the renewal of covenant between God and Israel, reaffirming and renewing the covenant made with the previous generation at Mount Sinai. We also recognized a simple five-part chiastic structure of Deuteronomy. There is an A and A', a B and B' with a central section X.

In that first lesson about form and structure, we briefly considered A and A', the beginning and ending sections, chapters 1-3 and chapters 31-34. This outer frame of Deuteronomy is basically narrative. The first chapters recap for us how this second generation came to be camped on the plains of Moab looking across the Jordan river into Canaan. The narrative at the end of Deuteronomy is in the present time with Moses transitioning leadership to Joshua as he directs Israel in the renewal of covenant.

The inner frame of the chiasm is not narrative. It is theological exhortation or exposition. These are the two sections B and B', chapters 4-11 and 27-30. Chapter 4 began with a call to obedience that we hear repeated throughout section B.

¹ Now, O Israel, listen to the statutes and the judgments which I am teaching you to perform, so that you may live and go in and take possession of the land which the Lord, the God of your fathers, is giving you.

Listen that you may live! Moses indicates that obedience is life, and it is also your witness as the nations around you observe how you live. He goes on to remind Israel in chapter 4 that the older ones among them heard the word of God themselves out of the midst of the fire. Our God is the one who speaks. He communicates his will, so that we might obey and live. Moses also warns against the pull to idolatry which separates from God which takes us down a different path, a path of adversity and death. In chapter 5, Moses repeats the ten commandments, which fulfill two functions of Torah; (1) to provide a low bar of civil law for society and (2) to provide a high bar of holiness for those in society who believe in God and want to pursue him with all their heart. These ten commandments are a paradigm for the moral vision of God, teaching us how to love him and how to love other people. Chapter 6 continues the call to obedience. And here we get the most famous challenge to listen and love in 6:4-5.

Hear, O Israel! The Lord is our God, the Lord is one! You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.

Listen and love. We also get in this chapter a call to teach these truths and to teach this story to the next generation. As you are in your home, as you are walking on the way, as you stand and as you sit. Teach your children, so they might listen, love, and live.

Then in chapters 7-9 Moses challenges the Israelites to remember who they are and to not become proud in their success. An ordered, moral life lived out in relationship with God leads to fruitfulness. But when you experience success, do not think it is because you are so numerous, you are so strong, you are so wise, you are so righteous, you are so good at business. Your heart is stubborn and wayward. Remember your success comes from God's grace and love. Be thankful and walk humbly with your God. The call to walk with God continues through chapters 10 and 11, ending with the command to enter the promised land and go to Mount Gerizim and Mount Ebal, to cut covenant there, and declare the blessings and curses of the covenant as a reminder that walking with God is life and turning from God is death.

Having completed the theological exhortation of chapters 4-11, the next section follows up with specific law code. That is the central section X, chapter 12-26. We are not going to address that section in this lesson. We are not moving linearly through the book of Deuteronomy. Instead, we are going to skip over to the other theological exhortation section B' which parallels this section B. So, from chapters 4-11 we are jumping over to chapters 27-30. Then in our next lesson we will come back to the center of Deuteronomy, chapters 12-26. That lesson will be our last in Deuteronomy, and in fact, our last lesson in our Pentateuch series.

But before we end with that lesson, in this lesson we are addressing section B', chapters 27-30, listen, love and live.

B' Theological Exhortation to Covenant Obedience (Deuteronomy 27-30)

I. Blessing and Curse (27-28)

You remember that chapter 11 ended with the command, after entering the land, go up on Mt. Gerizim and Mt. Ebal and there proclaim the blessings and curses of the covenant. Well, here, we continue right where chapter 11 left off. With the start of chapter 27, we get this command to go up on the two mountains, Ebal and Gerizim and to proclaim blessing and curse. And here we actually get the content of what that proclamation is going to be. This is in chapters 27-28 where we start with curse, move to blessing, and come back to curse.

Specific curses in 27:15-26

Starting with curse, we first get a list of specific curses in 27:15-26. This list gives us examples of the kind of behavior that deserves curse, without describing the result or consequence of the curse. Let's read some of these. I will abbreviate a little.

¹⁵ 'Cursed is the man who makes an idol or a molten image ... and sets *it* up in secret.'

¹⁶ 'Cursed is he who dishonors his father or mother.'

¹⁸ 'Cursed is he who misleads a blind *person* on the road.'

¹⁹ 'Cursed is he who distorts the justice due an alien, orphan, and widow.'

²¹ 'Cursed is he who lies with any animal.'

²² 'Cursed is he who lies with his sister, the daughter of his father or of his mother.'

²⁴ 'Cursed is he who strikes his neighbor in secret.'

²⁵ 'Cursed is he who accepts a bribe to strike down an innocent person.'

Each of these curses is to be followed by the refrain, "And all the people shall answer and say, 'Amen.'" There is a communal agreement that this is wicked behavior worthy of punishment. Society agrees, this behavior should be punished. And when we look at this list, the only one we might consider mild in our day is the curse for dishonoring father or mother. The rest are pretty despicable. And maybe we need to reconsider the importance of honoring father and mother.

The specific behaviors selected here suggest that curse is not enforced for minor infractions of the law. The consequences of these curses are going to fall on those who continue in sin, whether hiding their sin in secret or flaunting it in public. God is slow to anger. He is not waiting with a lightening bolt to strike down immediately every act of disobedience. He may act swiftly against sin when he deems it necessary, as with Ananias and Saphira in the book of Acts, but on the whole, we see the patience of God with sinful people. In fact, we probably feel like it is too much patience. God is continually extending opportunity for sinners to repent, and he is also requiring human leadership to step up and enforce justice. God entrusts to kings and elders and priests and judges, fathers and mothers the responsibility to address injustice and perversion.

General statement of blessing in 28:1 and 13-14.

The specific examples of curse in chapter 27 are not followed by specific examples of blessing. We don't get blessed is the man who does this and blessed is the man who does this. Though, that might sound familiar to you. Because, interestingly, Jesus does that in the Sermon on the Mount, which we have already seen makes connections to Deuteronomy. You remember, Jesus said, "Blessed are the poor in spirit...blessed are those who mourn...blessed are the meek...blessed are those who hunger and thirst after righteousness...blessed are the merciful...blessed are the pure in heart...blessed are the peacemakers...blessed are those who have been persecuted for the sake of righteousness (Matthew 5:3-10, abbreviated)." Jesus' list includes those who are upright in moral behavior, the merciful, pure in heart, peacemaker, but Jesus does not start there. He starts with those who see their need, who repent, who become humble. These are the poor in spirit, those who mourn, the meek. They do not hunger and thirst after righteousness as a moral standard they proudly believe they can attain. They know they can't. That is why they are poor in spirit. That is why they mourn. That is why they come humbly. They hunger and thirst after righteousness because they have begun to see who they are, and they have begun to crave life as God sees life.

Even though we do not have a list of blessings here in Deuteronomy like the beatitudes in Matthew, we do start and end the blessing section with a general statement of blessing. The blessings start this way in 28:1.

Now it shall be, if you diligently obey the Lord your God, being careful to do all His commandments which I command you today, the Lord your God will set you high above all the nations of the earth.

In general then, the one who obeys is the one who receives the blessing. The idea here is not perfect obedience. That can't be the idea. Remember, the law includes the sacrificial system and the Passover and the Day of Atonement. The law assumes struggle in the moral area of life. This is a call to pursue righteousness from the heart with care and diligence, which includes asking for forgiveness when you fail and then getting back up and continuing on with God. If the Israelites will pursue God and seek to apply his law in society and in their personal lives, then they will experience blessing from God. What that blessing looks like is described in 28:2-12.

Description of blessing in 28:2-12

Here is part of the blessing. This is 28:7, 9, 11 and 12 just to get a feel for it.

⁷ The Lord shall cause your enemies who rise up against you to be defeated before you; they will come out against you one way and will flee before you seven ways...

⁹ "The Lord will establish you as a holy people to Himself, as He swore to you, if you keep the commandments of the Lord your God and walk in His ways...

¹¹ The Lord will make you abound in prosperity, in the offspring of your body and in the offspring of your beast and in the produce of your ground, in the land which the Lord swore to your fathers to give you. ¹² The Lord will open for you His good storehouse, the heavens, to give rain to your land in its season and to bless all the work of your hand; and you shall lend to many nations, but you shall not borrow.

I see four categories of blessing here. There is victory in battle against enemies. There is fruitfulness in bearing children. There is fruitfulness of labor, specifically agricultural fruitfulness from crops and herds. And I would say that verse 9 communicates the blessing of purpose. “You will be established as a holy people.” That statement is reminiscent of God’s promise in Exodus 19:6 to make Israel a holy nation. To be holy is to be set apart as special for the Lord to use in a special way. Holiness implies purpose.

These blessings of protection, provision, and purpose all point back to the promise God made to Abraham in Genesis 12:1-3. That promise followed the Tower of Babel. Humankind sought in pride to establish a name for themselves, to define the worship of God in their own way, to define their own vision for human life. God tore down that tower of human pride and presumption. The Tower of Babel exemplified mankind’s attempt at self-definition to pull away from the path of God, which ultimately heads down a path of destruction and death that leads to eternal separation. God stepped in to save mankind from himself. And then God chose a people who were not a people. He promised that he would give this people a name and he would make them a blessing to the nations now scattered over the earth. That promise is coming to fruition now in Israel.

And these blessings of provision, protection, and purpose point back even further, further than Genesis 12, back to Genesis 1 and 2, to the original covenant God gave Adam and Eve, to be the image of God on earth, to rule over creation, to bring about abundance, and to multiply the human family. This commission has now been given to the people of Israel.

General statement of curse in 28:15

After this passage on blessing, Moses turns back to curse in the rest of chapter 28. He stated before what kind of behavior deserves curse. But he did not state what the curse would be. What are the consequences of that behavior? This section starts with a general statement of curse on the disobedient, just like the blessing section, then it is going to move on to the descriptions of the curses. So, it starts in 28:15,

But it shall come about, if you do not obey the Lord your God, to observe to do all His commandments and His statutes with which I charge you today, that all these curses will come upon you and overtake you:

Obey and you will be blessed. Disobey and you will be cursed. Well, okay. That is who gets cursed. The ones who disobey. What exactly are the consequences of the curse? What’s going to happen? The description comes in 28:14-68. It starts off bad then it gets worse, then it becomes downright awful.

Description of curse in 28:14-68

Here is a selection. The language of the curse is very similar to the language of blessing, though more extensive. Apparently, human beings need to be impressed more with the negative consequences for disobedience than with the positive consequences for obedience.

This is Deuteronomy 28:18, 21, 24 and 25.

¹⁸ “Cursed *shall be* the offspring of your body and the produce of your ground, the increase of your herd and the young of your flock.

²¹ “The Lord will make the pestilence cling to you until He has consumed you from the land where you are entering to possess it.

²⁴ “The Lord will make the rain of your land powder and dust; from heaven it shall come down on you until you are destroyed.

²⁵ The Lord shall cause you to be defeated before your enemies; you will go out one way against them, but you will flee seven ways before them, and you will be *an example of terror* to all the kingdoms of the earth.

If the Israelites determine to turn away from covenant obedience, God declares he will remove protection, provision, and purpose from them. They will be defeated by enemies. Their birthrate will drop. They will not experience fruitfulness in their agricultural labor. They will not be feared or respected by the nations as a special people set apart by God. No protection, no provision, no purpose.

This is not merely a threat. This is a promise. If you reject the good path of God and determine to go your own way, then you can expect detrimental consequences. And when it gets to the point of God removing protection from Israel, the consequences have potential to spiral out of control. Warfare at its worst decimates the land. When conquering armies eat everything they can get their hands on, burn fields, cut down trees, and besiege cities, the results are famine, disease, evaporation of wealth. In the most dehumanizing cases besieged citizens in cities turn to cannibalism. This is actually described in 28:53-57. I am not going to read it. God is not saying that he will make the Israelites cannibalistic. He is saying that when they have turned so far from him that he allows armies to besiege their cities and by not walking with God they have lost moral fortitude in their own souls, this is what the result will be. They will turn against their own family members to survive.

I do not think you can get to a worse state than that, though the chapter ends with another take on the extreme lostness of Israel. This is 28:68.

The Lord will bring you back to Egypt in ships, by the way about which I spoke to you, ‘You will never see it again!’ And there you will offer yourselves for sale to your enemies as male and female slaves, but there will be no buyer.

It would be bad enough returning back to Egypt again as slaves. But you will be so pestilent ridden and weak, that even when you offer yourself to be purchased as a slave, the Egyptians will look at you and conclude that you are not worth the food it would take to keep you alive.

Turning away from God, walking persistently on our own path, both individually and as a society, invites terrible consequences. Invites destruction and adversity.

Chapter 29 brings us back into our covenant context. Let’s go there to consider how we should think about covenant curse and covenant blessing. Let’s put it in context.

II. Call to Covenant with a Prophetic Vision of Failure (29)

We start with 29:1.

These are the words of the covenant which the Lord commanded Moses to make with the sons of Israel in the land of Moab, besides the covenant which He had made with them at Horeb.

That established for us the context. This is covenant renewal. These are blessing and curse in the context of covenant. The original covenant was established at Horeb, which is another name for Mt. Sinai. Now on the plain of Moab, Moses has written the book of Deuteronomy for the purpose of covenant renewal. This is not a new and separate covenant, but an update to covenant with this second generation that includes and adds to the original covenant of Sinai. Both covenants combine as one, and they are the covenant of Moses to be passed down through the generations of Israel.

And Moses is going to challenge the Israelites to submit to this covenant. Listen to that challenge. This is 29:10-15.

¹⁰ “You stand today, all of you, before the Lord your God: your chiefs, your tribes, your elders and your officers, *even* all the men of Israel, ¹¹ your little ones, your wives, and the alien who is within your camps, from the one who chops your wood to the one who draws your water, ¹² that you may enter into the covenant with the Lord your God, and into His oath which the Lord your God is making with you today, ¹³ in order that He may establish you today as His people and that He may be your God, just as He spoke to you and as He swore to your fathers, to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. ¹⁴ “Now not with you alone am I making this covenant and this oath, ¹⁵ but both with those who stand here with us today in the presence of the Lord our God and with those who are not with us here today.

In Deuteronomy 5:3 Moses reminded the Israelites that this covenant was not just made for your fathers but is now being renewed with you. Here he tells them that this covenant is not only with you who stand here today but with those not yet here, with your descendants who are to come. The people of Israel are now invited to enter into covenant with God, today, to affirm and agree to the covenant stipulations and the accompanying blessings and curses. They are to step onto the path with God, turn their backs on sin and death, and walk forward with him.

If we left it here, we might be able to imagine this as an American style motivational speech. This is movie worthy. "You stand today before the Lord your God ... that you may enter into covenant with the Lord your God and into his oath which the Lord your God is making with you today, that he may establish you and be your God! [Stand for God! You see the curses! You see the blessings! Choose the blessings! You can do it! We can do it! Let's stand for God!]" You can imagine the scene of joyful men and women and children; and people pumping their arms in the air and slapping each other on the back; children smiling and whooping along with the adults. "We've got this! We can do this! This is awesome!"

But Moses is not an American. He sounds a lot more Croatian to me. He gives them a motivational speech, but Moses follows it up with a prophetic vision of failure. It is kind of like this.

"You stand today before the Lord your God to enter into covenant with him. If you obey you will be blessed. And if you disobey you will be cursed. And you will disobey. This is just too hard for you. There is no way you are going to live up to this. I can look at you, and I can tell. Let me tell you what is going to happen. You say you are going to walk with God. And your all committed now at this moment. And you are all happy. You are all excited. But you are not going to last. You are going to turn away from God, and you are going to pursue all the bad things he told you not to. And then he is going to bring all these curses on you. No rain. No crops. Enemy invaders. And in the end, you are going to turn so far away from God that he is going to remove his protection completely, allowing foreigners to ravage the land and take whoever is left alive into exile."

That is not very optimistic, is it? That's not the we can do it, positive motivational speech. This is the tough reality speech. God knows from the beginning who he is dealing with. After the covenant at Sinai where that whole first generation shouted out, "All that the Lord has spoken, we will do. We will be obedient!" That is Exodus 24:7. God was not surprised that they could not make it forty days before they molded a golden calf and called it Elohim. God told them. "I am a holy God, and you are a stubborn, stiff-necked people. I don't know how I am going to prevent myself from burning you up on the way. You simply invite punishment."

God is calling Israel to a covenant that is lacking. And he is doing it intentionally. And it is not really the vision of life in this law that is lacking. Paul affirms in Romans 7:12. The law is holy and righteous and good. But this covenant does not cure the sinful nature of humankind. This covenant is going to teach God's people the real depravity of the human situation while constantly pointing them to the need for a more radical salvation.

Still, this prophetic vision of failure is not a vision of complete failure. It is a vision of eventual and inevitable failure. But when the Israelites keep their eye on God and pursue him, they are able to experience life and blessing with God. He tells them he has given them what they need to know, if they will trust him in that. We read that in the last verse of the chapter, this is 29:29,

The secret things belong to the Lord our God, but the things revealed belong to us and to our sons forever, that we may observe all the words of this law.

And he says in 30:11,

This commandment which I command you today is not too difficult for you, nor is it out of reach.

Moses affirms that in this law, in Genesis through Deuteronomy, the Israelites have the word that they need from God. This is the word David called sweeter than honey, more precious than gold. There is more. There are spiritual truths God has not chosen yet to reveal. And there are things that he has not yet done. There is more coming. Do not be striving after those other secret things that

God has not told you about. You can wonder about it. Focus not on the spiritual truth you do not have, but on the spiritual truth you do have. Set your mind to walking with God, loving him, loving your neighbor, seeking his kingdom, and God will work out the rest.

You can do this. That does not mean you can achieve the standard of righteousness. You can not do that. You will fail, many times in many ways. But this law accounts for that. You are accepted by grace. You have sacrifice as a means of confession and symbolic atonement. So, confess your sin. Stay open and honest before God. Stay close to God. And keep going. That is possible. And some of you will do it. Some whole generations will stay fairly close to God.

But the reality of struggle and eventual defeat is here in this prophetic vision. Failure to live for God as a people will plague you. This is 29:19-20.

¹⁹ It shall be when [that man] hears the words of this curse, that he will boast, saying, 'I have peace though I walk in the stubbornness of my heart in order to destroy the watered *land* with the dry.' ²⁰ The Lord shall never be willing to forgive him, but rather the anger of the Lord and His jealousy will burn against that man, and every curse which is written in this book will rest on him, and the Lord will blot out his name from under heaven.

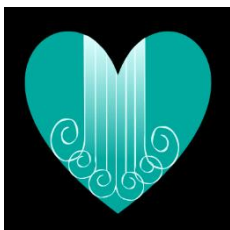
Men and women will rise up in Israel who scoff at the idea of curse or the idea that they must behave in a certain way, who dismiss the moral vision of God and reject his presence and authority. There is a pattern that we are going to see in history that scholars call the Deuteronomistic cycle. A generation of Israelites walks with God and experiences blessing. The next generation largely turns from God to idolatry and immorality. God removes his provision and protection allowing that generation to suffer. That is curse. At some point, the people cry out. God forgives them, saves them. And they are restored. Blessing, Curse, Restoration; Blessing, Curse, Restoration; Blessing, Curse, Restoration; we see it over and over again. It is a clear pattern in the book of Judges. It is also an approximate pattern that keeps occurring through Samuel and the book of Kings, all the way to the Babylonian exile. This is the Deuteronomistic cycle. Blessing, Curse, Restoration, until the final curse comes and the people are removed from the land.

When we survey the Old Testament, we get a picture of God as one who really is slow to anger and quick to forgive. Generations move away from God, and the curse comes slowly. It takes 20, 30, 40 years. God's hand of protection is not quickly removed. But when it is, and Israel cries out from the heart, God is quick to forgive and restore Israel back into right relationship.

God is slow to anger, and he is quick to forgive. But slow to anger is not the same as not angry. God's anger burns against sin, cruelty, depravity, and injustice. God will punish. These curses are a just response from a holy God. But they are not only that. The punishment of God always includes an implicit offer of restoration. If you will recognize what is happening, if you will recognize the curse has come on you because you turned away from God, if you will turn back, you will be forgiven. If you will turn back you will be healed.

This implicit call of restoration that comes with every curse, every act of discipline from God, becomes an explicit promise in chapter 30. We have considered the curses and the blessings. We have considered the covenant context, how should we think about curse and blessing. So, now let's look at this promise of restoration.

III. Promised Restoration (30)



In the Ancient Near East, no one faulted a King for bringing against a rebellious vassal the stated curse of covenant. You rebel, you get the curses. Punishment for covenant breaking was understood. It was expected. Curse was a recognized element of covenant. But no known suzerain-vassal treaty from the 2nd millennium includes a promise of restoration back into covenant after curses have been enforced on a rebellious, vassal people, none; well, none except for the covenant established between God and Israel. It is the only covenant that

includes a vision of restoration. It is completely unique to Deuteronomy.

After the prophetic vision of failure in chapter 29, Moses gives a prophetic vision of restoration. This promise of restoration is a monument of grace in the book of Deuteronomy. The promise is given in Deuteronomy 30:1-6.

¹ So it shall be when all of these things have come upon you, the blessing and the curse which I have set before you, and you call *them* to mind in all nations where the Lord your God has banished you, ² and you return to the Lord your God and obey Him with all your heart and soul according to all that I command you today, you and your sons, ³ then the Lord your God will restore you from captivity, and have compassion on you, and will gather you again from all the peoples where the Lord your God has scattered you. ⁴ If your outcasts are at the ends of the earth, from there the Lord your God will gather you, and from there He will bring you back. ⁵ The Lord your God will bring you into the land which your fathers possessed, and you shall possess it; and He will prosper you and multiply you more than your fathers. ⁶ Moreover the Lord your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your descendants, to love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, so that you may live.

The promise of a new heart is the promise of new covenant. The curse of exile looks ahead 900 years to Babylon. That is when the final curse is going to occur. This promise of restoration looks ahead 1500 years to Jesus. In his own day, Jeremiah envisioned the promise of the new covenant this way in Jeremiah 31:33,

“But this is the covenant which I will make with the house of Israel after those days,” declares the Lord, “I will put My law within them and on their heart I will write it; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people.”

After the new covenant had come, Paul refers back to this kind of language of Deuteronomy when he said this in Romans 2:29,

But he is a Jew who is one inwardly; and circumcision is that which is of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter; and his praise is not from men, but from God.

This promise of a new heart is one of the great differences between the old covenant and the new. Deuteronomy is looking far ahead. The old covenant calls God’s people to live out the moral vision of God, without doing a new spiritual work inside the people. The Psalms testify that believing Israelites experienced an inner reality of joy and love in their walk with God. Still, they lacked this further work that is promised of the indwelling Holy Spirit. They can’t walk in the way of the Spirit. That is something secret. That is something being held until the new covenant.

There is a new reality promised with the new covenant. But as we continue on in Deuteronomy 30, there is an expectation of life with God in the old covenant context. It may not be the exact same thing as in the new covenant. But the expectation is here. As we already read in 29:29, “The secret things belong to the Lord, but the things revealed belong to us.” Israel was not called to live in the not yet revealed things of the new covenant. That is not yet. They were called to experience the life available to them in the old covenant. Life is the language of Moses. Listen, love, and live. The call to covenant obedience is a call to life. Let’s read the complete last paragraph of chapter 30. These are verses 15-19,

¹⁵ See, I have set before you today life and prosperity, and death and adversity; ¹⁶ in that I command you today to love the Lord your God, to walk in His ways and to keep His commandments and His statutes and His judgments, that you may live and multiply, and that the Lord your God may bless you in the land where you are entering to possess it. ¹⁷ But if your heart turns away and you will not obey, but are drawn away and worship other gods and serve them, ¹⁸ I declare to you today that you shall surely perish. You will not prolong *your* days in the land where you are crossing the Jordan to enter and possess it. ¹⁹ I call heaven and earth to witness against you today, that I have set before you life and death, the blessing and the curse. So choose life in order that you may live, you and your descendants,

"I set before you today life and prosperity, and death and adversity....So choose life in order that you may live." This is the call to life in mosaic covenant. Let's finish this lesson considering how covenant obedience brings about life. Here are three ways obedience brings about the blessing of life.

(1) First, the blessings of life and the curse of death can refer to the reward or punishment that comes from one in authority without any direct connection to the actual act of obedience. For example, if your commanding officer says dig a hole, then you do not expect to have blessing in your life from the digging of the hole. Whether there is a hole or not, does not enhance your quality of life. But if your act of obedience moves your commanding officer to give you extra rations or to give you early leave on the weekend, then you have experienced blessing from the right authority over you as a result of obedience. Conversely, refusal to dig the hole could get you put on punishment detail and significantly reduce your quality of life.

If God chooses to give rain or withhold rain based on the faithfulness of his people, there was not a cause and effect between the action and the rain. It is the will of God. Eating the right food or acting kindly to a neighbor or looking out for an orphan has no cause and effect relationship to the rain. But these acts of obedience may please the authority over you who may then reward you with rain.

Covenant obedience with God is not meant to be a formula by which we move God to action. Israel was constantly slipping into this. There is no record of righteousness that guarantees various kinds of blessing in exchange for the right number of righteousness points. That kind of thinking leans towards the sin of taking God's name in vain. We obey. And we leave the timing and the amount and the kind of blessing in God's hands. We do not attempt to manipulate God through good behavior. We pursue God by living according to his moral vision. And we trust God with the reward, the blessings of protection, provision and purpose, according to his will.

(2) There is a second way that obedience brings about life and prosperity. At times there is a direct cause and effect relationship between obedience and reward. Digging some random hole may not affect your quality of life. But digging a series of holes to be used as latrines could affect the quality of life of every soldier in the unit; or digging holes to trap animals for food or to plant crops. The commanded action may bring about both the pleasure of God in response to obedience and also some direct benefit from the action.

The purpose of the ceremonial holiness code was to make a distinction between life and death, sin and holiness in the minds of the Israelites and to set the Israelites off as special, holy to the Lord. They were to behave differently from the people around them. At the same time, eating the kosher food of Mosaic law is nutritionally beneficial, leading to better quality of life. Enforcing rest on mothers after childbirth, requiring washing after touching a dead body, burying waste outside the camp, all these actions have potential cause and effect relationships to the health and well-being of individuals and of the whole society. And it may not always be clear to us when we are obeying the commands of the law, what is the cause and effect, how does this bring benefit into my life? It can happen without us even understanding.

This is also true with the moral laws. When we are young and naïve, we may not understand how waiting for marriage to have sex is going to bring about blessing and life in our marriage relationship. We might not get it. But that does not change the fact that if you disobey, you bring pain into your life, and if you obey, you will bring blessing into your life.

When we go back through all the ten commandments, we can easily consider how the pursuit of the positive side of the moral continuum promotes blessing in the life of us as individuals and the whole community. Speaking words of life to other people, loving your neighbor, keeping covenant in marriage, working so as to have extra to give, speaking truth in business, in law, in personal

relationship, rejoicing with those who rejoice and weeping with those who weep, all these actions have the potential to cause blessing in the life of an individual and the life of society. Family is strengthened. Business is strengthened. Government is strengthened. Life and blessings result in a cause and effect relationship with obedience. God's vision of the moral life is God's wisdom for life. There is direct blessing in living the way God instructs us to live.

(3) There is a third way that covenant obedience brings about life. This is the most important. Moses continually connects obedience with relationship. I think 10:12-13 is my favorite expression of this truth.

¹² Now, Israel, what does the Lord your God require from you, but to fear the Lord your God, to walk in all His ways and love Him, and to serve the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, ¹³ and to keep the Lord's commandments and His statutes which I am commanding you today for your good?

When we obey out of the heart, we are actively walking in relationship with God. As a result, God may smile and give us a blessing. Also, as a result, we may experience the blessing that results directly from our behavior. But then there is this third way. When we obey and God smiles, we just enjoy the fact that God smiles. God himself is our reward. When joy and satisfaction and contentment come from walking with God, then we experience the right reward of intimate relationship. Obedience brings us into relationship with our heavenly father. And joy rises out of our hearts, not at what he gives us, but because of our relationship with him. Because we feel he loves us, and we are beginning to love him back. We are not chasing after some other blessing. God is the blessing. And he is life.

Reflection Questions

1. Observe a portion of the blessing and curse section by reading Deuteronomy 28:1-26? What do you notice as interesting or important or strange or confusing? What questions come to mind?

2. Does the curse section here paint a picture of God as an intensely strict teacher always hovering over you in class, in the halls, on the playground, even somehow showing up at the mall or in your home, bringing down swift punishment on every mistake or inappropriate comment?

We might be quick to say no to that characterization, but that is an approximate feeling that a lot of people have about God. He is the stern policeman in the sky, waiting, hoping for you to step out of line, so you better keep your head down and do your best to go unnoticed.

3. How does understanding blessing and curse as part suzerain-vassal covenant between God and Israel help you to put this section of the Bible into perspective? (If it helps, think about individual believers who lived under covenant with God...Naomi, Ruth, Samuel, Saul, David...how did curse and blessing apply to these people as individuals?)

4. Read Deuteronomy 30:1-20. What do you notice as interesting or important or strange or confusing? What questions come to mind?

5. How have you experienced the promise of life in your own walk with God?

a. What blessings have you experienced that came from the will of your Father apart from any cause and effect relationship to your obedience? What are some things he has done for you or given you as you have walked with him?

b. What are some blessings you have experienced as a cause and effect of your obedience? You chose to obey in some way and saw a blessing as a result of your action?

c. Have you experienced the joy of knowing God himself? What is that like for you?

Lesson 29: Deuteronomy 12-26 King Priest Prophet

Introduction

Deuteronomy brings us to the end of the journey to establish covenant kingdom between God and his chosen people. Genesis was our Kingdom Prologue setting the theological foundation and introducing us to the Abrahamic covenant of promise. Exodus gave us kingdom establishment as God cut covenant with his rescued people. Numbers told us of kingdom rebellion and held us up in the wilderness waiting for a second generation to take up the challenge. Deuteronomy has now given us kingdom renewal. This is the challenge to the second generation. These five books are the covenant of Moses. This is Torah. This is the Pentateuch.

In our last book of the Pentateuch, Deuteronomy. Moses transitions leadership over to Joshua and challenges the second generation to embrace covenant with the Lord. He tells them to listen, love and live. Covenant obedience from a heart of love is the way to experience an abundant life.

Deuteronomy is chiastically structured. The very center of that structure, chapters 12-26, is specific law code. This is what it is going to mean to live with God and live for God. If you want life, this is how you must order society, this is how you must order your lives, this is the commitment you must make with God.

The mission to be salt and light is not spiritual abstraction. It is quite practical. Salt and light do not come from the Tower of Babel, with man making a name for himself, reaching himself up to God. Humankind does not define God. Humankind does not define what is good and just. God defines himself. And God gives humankind a moral vision of life. We have considered how the ten commandments provide a moral paradigm. The law code gives specific commands, indicating how the moral paradigm works out in the religious, civil, and moral life of a nation.

We are not going to address the specifics of the law code in Deuteronomy. We took time to consider the legal code of the Pentateuch in our lessons on Leviticus. In this lesson, as we conclude our series, I am going to point you to three aspects of the Deuteronomical legal code that stand out to me. They are order, tension, and leadership.

Order

The law code of Deuteronomy provides order for Israelite society. Let's consider the overall structure of this legal code. The section begins in 12:1 with a familiar proclamation about the commandments Moses is teaching in Deuteronomy. This is 12:1,

¹ These are the statutes and the judgments which you shall carefully observe in the land which the Lord, the God of your fathers, has given you to possess as long as you live on the earth.

These commandments, these are at the heart of covenant. If you desire to obey God from your heart and soul, then you are asking, "How shall we live?" That is the right response to grace. This law code is giving you specific direction on exactly how to live in covenant relationship. So, we are starting the law code section with the declaration that if you listen and love you will live. We end the law code with a charge to embrace that reality. Here are the final verses of the legal code. This is Deuteronomy 26:16-19,

¹⁶ This day the Lord your God commands you to do these statutes and ordinances. You shall therefore be careful to do them with all your heart and with all your soul. ¹⁷ You have today declared the Lord to be your God, and that you would walk in His ways and keep His statutes, His commandments and His ordinances, and listen to His voice. ¹⁸ The Lord has today declared you to be His people, a treasured possession, as He promised you, and that you should keep all His commandments; ¹⁹ and that He will set you high above all nations which He has made, for praise, fame, and honor; and that you shall be a consecrated people to the Lord your God, as He has spoken.

In between these two calls to covenant obedience, we have specific commands covering an array of topics. In the Word Biblical Commentary on Deuteronomy, Duane Christensen recognizes a 5-part chiasmic structuring of this code. We had a five-part chiasm of the whole of Deuteronomy. And now we have a five-part chiasm of just the law code section. Both the beginning of the law code 12:1-14:21 and the end 26:1-19 contain laws about public worship at the central sanctuary and in local towns. The beginning of the inner frame 14:22-16:17 contains sacred laws. These laws deal with sabbath commands and pilgrimage festivals. The end of the inner frame 21:10-25:19 contains secular laws. These laws deal with horizontal relationships among God's people. And then we have the center, we have the x, this is 16:18-21:9, and it contains laws dealing with leadership in Israel.

Chiasmic structure of Deuteronomy 12-26 (Section X The Covenant Stipulations)

| | |
|---|-------------|
| A Public worship at the central sanctuary and in local towns | 12:1–14:21 |
| B Sacred laws—sabbatical moratoria and pilgrimage festivals | 14:22–16:17 |
| X Laws on leadership and authority in ancient Israel | 16:18–21:9 |
| B' Secular laws—on horizontal relationships with others | 21:10–25:19 |
| A' Public worship at the central sanctuary and in local towns | 26:1–19 |

The laws provide order and stability for society; order for worship, for economics, for leadership, for the courts, for moral relationship with one another. The how of the commands is not always immediately apparent. How does living this way provide a more orderly or stable society. This ordering of life requires trust in God that he has a plan and that his plan for Israel is good. This is the promise of life we addressed in our last lesson, "See I have set before you life and prosperity, and death and adversity...so choose life! (Deuteronomy 30:15 and 19b)." That promise of life most fundamentally speaks to our relationship with God. He is our life. We experience life by being in relationship with him. That is eternal. That is fundamental. At the same time, God has created us to live in physical bodies in physical places in relationship with other physical people. The life we experience in covenant with God includes meeting the needs and desires that we have in this physical world in which we live. The ordering of society commanded by God leads to life in the form of security and wealth and relationship. Consider this in 15:4-6,

⁴ "However, there will be no poor among you, since the Lord will surely bless you in the land which the Lord your God is giving you as an inheritance to possess, ⁵ if only you listen obediently to the voice of the Lord your God, to observe carefully all this commandment which I am commanding you today. ⁶ For the Lord your God will bless you as He has promised you, and you will lend to many nations, but you will not borrow; and you will rule over many nations, but they will not rule over you.

Tension between idealistic and pragmatic

Along with order, there is also an inherent tension in the law between the high vision of life that God calls his people to pursue and a practical vision that takes into account the weakness of people. Moses just declared a high vision that there will be no poor among the Israelites if only they will obey the voice of the Lord. That is the ideal to be pursued. But the very next verses add a pragmatic view, 15:7-8,

⁷ If there is a poor man with you, one of your brothers, in any of your towns in your land which the Lord your God is giving you, you shall not harden your heart, nor close your hand from your poor brother; ⁸ but you shall freely open your hand to him, and shall generously lend him sufficient for his need *in* whatever he lacks.

The idealist loves the first statement, "There will be no poor. If you just do what you are supposed to do there will be no poor." The pragmatic likes verse 7. "If there is a poor man with you, one of your brothers, then this is what you are supposed to do." It is an acknowledging that there are going to be poor among you. Moses' promise of material wealth in verse 4, "There will be no poor among you," aligns with the promises of blessing and life in the theological exhortation sections. For example, Deuteronomy 30:9-10,

⁹ Then the Lord your God will prosper you abundantly in all the work of your hand, in the offspring of your body and in the offspring of your cattle and in the produce of your ground, for the Lord will again rejoice over you for good, just as He rejoiced over your fathers; ¹⁰ if you obey the Lord your God to keep His commandments and His statutes which are written in this book of the law, if you turn to the Lord your God with all your heart and soul.

There is promise of prosperity, of wealth. That promise is connected with the wealth of an orderly society. Covenant prosperity does come in part directly as an act of the Lord, blessing his servants for obedience. His servants obey, he sends rain. The obedience did not cause the rain. The obedience was blessed by God. Prosperity is also an effect of an ordered, moral, disciplined, loving life. There is a lot of cause and effect going on in covenant obedience. Obey and you will live because obedience leads you to the kind of behavior that produces success or abundance, goodness in life.

We do need to put the language of wealth and prosperity into context. What is wealth for a farmer or prosperity for a sheep herder? The promised blessings in Deuteronomy are almost all agricultural. The farmer is praying for a good harvest and the sheep herder for healthy flocks. To be prosperous is to have wealth, to have extra, to have more than what is needed for basic sustenance; to have extra to give to family and friends and people in need; to enjoy the feast days with fat calves and milk and honey; to fill up stores in case of a bad harvest.

Wealth and abundance in this context is certainly not a private jet or millions of dollars in a savings account or a mansion or expensive cars or jewelry. The words wealth and riches depend a great deal on your perspective. To have meat and milk and warm shelter, a close family with a loving marriage, a community that gathers on sabbath, celebrating weddings and feast days, free from plague or marauders, living under the rule of law, working your own land, worshiping God freely, this is what people through most of human history would call abundant wealth. This is prosperity.

And this will be the experience of the faithful, most of the time. But there will still be poor. There will still be suffering. Every faithful believer who does not die by accident or warfare will die by sickness. We all get sick and die. Sickness is a fact of life in our fallen world. Faith in Christ does not eradicate cancer. And there is this tension in the law code. We see that God desires our wealth. He desires our health. Prosperity for the community is the promised result of covenant obedience. It is the promised result for individuals. Still the poor will be with you and good people will suffer. And the tension here is ongoing, and that is why we are going to get the book of Job later in the Old Testament.

Leadership

Moving on to the third aspect of this law code that stands out to me, the ordered society, both ideal and pragmatic, requires leadership. That is the third aspect. The five-part chiasmic structure of the law code has public worship on the outer frames, sacred and secular laws on the inner frame and right there in the center laws of leadership. This central section can also be organized chiasmically. This 16:18-21:9. The outer frame 16:18-17:13 and 19:1-21:9 address laws concerning the courts which mention judges and priests. The language is the same in the beginning and the end. The first half of the inner frame addresses laws concerning the king. That is 17:14-20. The second half of the inner frame addresses laws concerning prophets, that's 18:9-22. And the center addresses laws concerning the Levitical priests, that in 18:1-8.

Chiasmic structure of Deuteronomy 16:18-21:9 (Section X Laws on Leadership and Authority)

| | |
|--|-------------|
| A Laws on judges and officials and right worship in the land | 16:18–17:13 |
| B Law of the king | 17:14–20 |
| X Law of the Levitical priests | 18:1–8 |
| B' Law of the prophets | 18:9–22 |
| A' Laws concerning the courts—administration of justice | 19:1–21:9 |

So, we have law of the courts, law of the king, law of the priest, law of the prophet, and then back to law of the courts. It is right there in the center, king, priest, and prophet. That's the center of the law code of Deuteronomy. The section on prophets is interesting to me. It contains a warning and a promise. And I want to focus on that section because I feel like it is the most relevant to us in our new covenant context. So, let's focus in on the law of the prophets. This is 18:9-22. I am going to read the whole passage.

⁹ When you enter the land which the Lord your God gives you, you shall not learn to imitate the detestable things of those nations. ¹⁰ There shall not be found among you anyone who makes his son or his daughter pass through the fire, one who uses divination, one who practices witchcraft, or one who interprets omens, or a sorcerer, ¹¹ or one who casts a spell, or a medium, or a spiritist, or one who calls up the dead. ¹² For whoever does these things is detestable to the Lord; and because of these detestable things the Lord your God will drive them out before you. ¹³ "You shall be blameless before the Lord your God.

¹⁴ For those nations, which you shall dispossess, listen to those who practice witchcraft and to diviners, but as for you, the Lord your God has not allowed you *to do* so. ¹⁵ The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you, from your countrymen, you shall listen to him.

¹⁶ This is according to all that you asked of the Lord your God in Horeb on the day of the assembly, saying, 'Let me not hear again the voice of the Lord my God, let me not see this great fire anymore, or I will die.'

¹⁷ The Lord said to me, 'They have spoken well. ¹⁸ 'I will raise up a prophet from among their countrymen like you, and I will put My words in his mouth, and he shall speak to them all that I command him. ¹⁹ 'It shall come about that whoever will not listen to My words which he shall speak in My name, I Myself will require *it* of him. ²⁰ 'But the prophet who speaks a word presumptuously in My name which I have not commanded him to speak, or which he speaks in the name of other gods, that prophet shall die.'

²¹ You may say in your heart, 'How will we know the word which the Lord has not spoken?' ²² When a prophet speaks in the name of the Lord, if the thing does not come about or come true, that is the thing which the Lord has not spoken. The prophet has spoken it presumptuously; you shall not be afraid of him.

I understand if you are getting a little tired of chiasm by now. I've heard it suggested that one reason for such a highly structured style in Deuteronomy is for the sake of memorization. It made it easier to get it into the mind by having so much order. There is repetition here in this passage about prophets that once again suggests a chiastic structure. You may have caught some of the repetition as I read. A phrase that stands out is "God will raise up a prophet like me." That phrase is first in verse 15 and then it is repeated in verse 17. So, the outer frame of this chiasm addresses false prophets, first at the beginning with a warning in 18:9-13 and then at the end with a test for identifying false prophets in 18:21-22. The inner frame includes this repeated promise that Yahweh will raise up a prophet in Israel and also includes a repeated warning against false prophets. These two sections are 18:14-15 and 18:17-20. The center is just one verse 18:16 which reminds Israel of their request at Horeb for God not to speak to them directly but through Moses as mediator.

Chiastic structure of Deuteronomy 18:9-22 (Section B' Laws of the prophets)

| | |
|---|----------|
| A No prophets who seek messages from other gods | 18:9–13 |
| B YHWH will raise up a prophet in Israel | 18:14–15 |
| X The people requested prophetic mediation at Horeb | 18:16 |
| B' YHWH will raise up a prophet in Israel | 18:17–20 |
| A' The true prophet is the one whose word comes to pass | 18:21–22 |

Let's consider first the warning against false prophets and then the promise of a prophet like Moses.

Warning against false prophets

The first verses of our present passage 18:9-13 do not use the term prophet, so to call this a warning against false prophets is using the term prophet in a very broad cultural sense. Prophets are those who discern the minds of the gods and speak for the gods in a multitude of ways. This warning specifically names witchcraft, spiritism, divination, and contacting the dead. We would think that Christians would recognize and reject such activities with no hesitation. But there is a long history of spiritual practices foreign to the Bible making their way into Christian practice. I recently heard a quote from a Christian leader endorsing spiritual practices with this phrase, "God is bigger than his book." Well, if that means there is much more to God than he has revealed to us in the Bible, I heartily agree. God is bigger than his book. He has not given us everything. But if that means we need someone to give us new words of revelation to take us into spiritual practices and experiences not described for us in Scripture, then get uncomfortable really quickly. We do not come to the gospel of Christ and then move on to a separate stage of enlightenment that is not included or described in Bible. We come to the gospel of Christ and continue to go deeper into the gospel of Christ through the study and application of God's word. That is our main spiritual discipline. We are not looking for practices outside of the Bible.

God may be bigger than his book. But we are not at liberty to define truth about God or truth about spiritual experience outside of Scripture. This was the point of our passage from the previous lesson, Deuteronomy 29:29, "The secret things belong to the Lord our God, but the things revealed belong to us and to our sons forever, that we may observe the words of this law." The things not yet revealed are not for us. God is bigger than his book, but he has given us his book. This is enough for you. The things revealed are given to us for our meditation and our reflection and our study and our obedience. This idea continues in Deuteronomy 30:11-14,

¹¹ For this commandment which I command you today is not too difficult for you, nor is it out of reach. ¹² It is not in heaven, that you should say, 'Who will go up to heaven for us to get it for us and make us hear it, that we may observe it?' ¹³ Nor is it beyond the sea, that you should say, 'Who will cross the sea for us to get it for us and make us hear it, that we may observe it?'

¹⁴ But the word is very near you, in your mouth and in your heart, that you may observe it.

Israel is not to continually search out new spiritual experience apart from the words of Scripture. God did not hide the truth across the sea or up in a mountain in the heavens or somewhere difficult to get to. God gave his word for Israel through Moses. Covenant obedience takes discipline and hard work and it requires growth. You get better as you grow. Eve took the easy way and Adam followed right with her. Where are you going to get your wisdom from? By stretching the boundaries God has set, by listening to the voices that say he is holding back on you? Or through the more difficult road of going back to God and his word to ask clarification, to think and reflect, to walk with God until you get it and obeying even if you don't.

The words I just quoted from Deuteronomy may sound familiar to you, but maybe from a different context. Paul takes Deuteronomy 30:11-14 and restates it for the new covenant revelation of Jesus Christ. This is Romans 10:6-8,

⁶ But the righteousness based on faith speaks as follows: "Do not say in your heart, 'Who will ascend into heaven?' (that is, to bring Christ down), ⁷ or 'Who will descend into the abyss?' (that is, to bring Christ up from the dead)." ⁸ But what does it say? "The word is near you, in your mouth and in your heart"—that is, the word of faith which we are preaching,

Just as Moses said, "It is not out of reach. You do not have to go and get it. I have given it to you." So, also, Paul says, you do not have to say, "How are we going to go up into heaven to find out this message." Or, "How can we go down into hell and let them speak to us, so that we can really know what it is like." Christ has been there. Christ came from heaven. Christ died and rose again. So, if you are seeking for truth outside of Christ and his word and the word of his apostles, then you are

devaluing what you have. Hasn't Christ come from heaven and hasn't Christ risen from the dead. And hasn't he given us his word. Why are we searching for a new word from Christ or some new spiritual experience rather than walking with the Christ of Scripture, studying all that he has taught us, and fixing our eyes on him according to the revelation of his word.

And there is some tension here. We are to listen for the subjective voice of the Holy Spirit guiding us. God does guide us. So, I am not discounting that. At times God speaks through others powerful, miraculous words of encouragement and direction. So, God is speaking in us, and he is speaking to us through other people. Maturity comes as we both learn to listen to God and as we learn to test what we hear by the word of Scripture.

I become very worried when I see or hear about Christians employing practices that I just don't see in the Bible. It looks like new age. It looks like Hinduism quite frankly. It does not look related to spiritual habits of Scripture. I worry when I hear Christians talking about seeking out angelic beings or talking about angels being all around us and how important that is to them. I do not see that in the practice of Scripture. Or Christians trying to meditate in such a way that they conjure up a picture of Jesus, and Jesus is speaking to them. And I am thinking, "Why in the world do you think your image of Jesus is actually Jesus." I don't see that anywhere in Scripture. Or moving from one emotional high to another emotional high, just looking for that kind of experience.

I think we need to be asking ourselves these questions, "How devoted am I to learning the word I have been given? Am I testing my spiritual experience according to the words of Scripture? In my eagerness to experience God emotionally, am I also seeking to know God with my mind through his word? Am I seeking multiple experiences apart from the gospel of Christ or am I seeking to walk in the gospel of Christ, to walk with him in the truth revealed? Am I seeking an easy path to wisdom, like the plucking of a fruit from a tree? Do I just want an experience that will make me wise or am I seeking wisdom over time through the hard work of obedience and ongoing study?"

We have to test ourselves, and we have to test our leaders, especially leaders who claim to speak the very words of God. Christians mean different things sometimes when they use the word prophet. Sometimes the word prophet is used to mean one who applies the word of God to the people of God. That is almost like the gift of preaching as the gift of prophecy. At other times the word prophet applies to someone who believes they have heard something from God for another person, like a word of wisdom or encouragement. At other times, and this is the usage we have to be very careful about, the title prophet is being used to claim authoritative utterance. These were the prophets of Scripture. When they spoke, they said, "Thus saith the Lord." And we now believe that every word they spoke came from God. His word is inspired. The prophets did not speak on their own but were carried along by the Holy Spirit. They spoke it from the Lord. And they meant it.

I like to make a distinction between big "P" prophecy and little "p" prophecy. Little "p" prophecy would be using the term of prophecy in the first two ways of applying the word of God to the people of God, the gift of preaching or having a word of wisdom or encouragement from God for someone. Little "p" prophecy assumes a tentativeness in the preaching or in the giving a word for somebody else. It is not a claim to authority. It is, "I think God has given me this message for you." And we grow in our ability to use our spiritual gifts and in our ability to hear from the Lord. So, sober judgement, humility, requires us to recognize our susceptibility to error. And that leads to a tentativeness. "I think this is what God is saying." And when I am preaching, I am willing to be corrected. I understand that I may make some mistake. And I don't need to be stoned if I do make a mistake. Big "P" prophecy is not tentative. It is a confident assertion that God has spoken. It is standing up in front of people and saying, "God has said this. You are now obliged to act on it. This is the word of God."

Moses gives us this test for big "P" prophecy in 18:20-22,

²⁰ 'But the prophet who speaks a word presumptuously in My name which I have not commanded him to speak, or which he speaks in the name of other gods, that prophet shall die.' ²¹ You may say in your heart, 'How will we know the word which the Lord has not

spoken?' ²² When a prophet speaks in the name of the Lord, if the thing does not come about or come true, that is the thing which the Lord has not spoken. The prophet has spoken it presumptuously; you shall not be afraid of him.

So, when a guy has a word from the Lord that this sister in the church is going to marry him. And he goes up and says, "I have a prophecy that you are going to be my wife." Well, he better hope she does not marry somebody else, because we need to take him out and stone him if she does. If he is claiming that level of authority. If he is claiming to be a prophet speaking the word of God and if other Christian leaders are claiming direction based on the clear direction of the Lord, and there is no tentativeness there, there is no, "I sense God speaking," or, "I think this is what God is saying for us. I believe it. Let's do it." But that is kind of tentative. If it is a clear authoritative utterance, then if it is not true, that is evil. It is a claim to authority that the person does not have the right to claim.

But what if the word of the prophet does come true? Does that prove the prophet speaks for God? Well, not necessarily. Moses gave this warning, this is earlier in the legal code, this is 13:1-5,

¹ If a prophet or a dreamer of dreams arises among you and gives you a sign or a wonder, ² and the sign or the wonder comes true, concerning which he spoke to you, saying, 'Let us go after other gods (whom you have not known) and let us serve them,' ³ you shall not listen to the words of that prophet or that dreamer of dreams; for the Lord your God is testing you to find out if you love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul. ⁴ You shall follow the Lord your God and fear Him; and you shall keep His commandments, listen to His voice, serve Him, and cling to Him. ⁵ But that prophet or that dreamer of dreams shall be put to death, because he has counseled rebellion against the Lord your God who brought you from the land of Egypt and redeemed you from the house of slavery, to seduce you from the way in which the Lord your God commanded you to walk. So you shall purge the evil from among you.

It is possible for false prophets to work miracles. It says that God allows this to happen because God is testing us. He has given us his word. Are we committed to his word, even in the face of miracles. And Moses does not explain how. How do these miracles happen? Sometimes it is through deception. It is not a miracle at all. But it could also be through demonic power. We can think of the magicians who initially opposed Moses in Exodus. We are not told whether they were being deceptive or whether they really had some kind of power. We are just told they duplicated his miracles until God took the plagues up to a level that they could not replicate. We can also think of Jesus' words at the end of the sermon on the mount to some workers of miracles. This is Matthew 7:22-23,

²² Many will say to Me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in Your name, and in Your name cast out demons, and in Your name perform many miracles?' ²³ And then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness.'

So, they are taking the name of the Lord God in vain. They do not really know Christ. But they see him as a name of power that they can use. And they are using it. And things are happening. But they are not truly with Christ. They practice lawlessness.

So, while unrealized prophecy shows us that we are dealing with a false prophet, the miracle of realized prophecy does not prove we are dealing with a true prophet. It could be deception, or it could be demonic power. We test the prophet by the fruit of his character (That is also Sermon on the Mount, Matthew 7:15-19.) and by comparing his teaching to the teaching of Scripture. Is he or she taking us back to Scripture, teaching us to apply, or to recognize, to apply the truth of God's Word to our lives, or is he or she taking us beyond Scripture in a different direction to something new? Some kind of experience that is not in Scripture.

Promise of a prophet like Moses

That's the warning. Moses also gave a promise. "The Lord will raise up for you a prophet like me." What does that mean, a prophet like me? The first and most obvious candidate in the context is Joshua,

especially when we consider the first few chapters of Joshua which describe him calling the people to covenant obedience like Moses, sending spies into the land like Moses, and dividing the Jordan river with his staff for all the people to cross over like Moses. So, this looks like a prophet like Moses.

Even so, the very last verses of Deuteronomy make this point, “Since then no prophet has risen in Israel like Moses, whom the Lord knew face to face (Deuteronomy 34:10).” There was something very special about Moses’ relationship with God. And his ability to communicate. At the time of Jesus, Jews expected three end times figures to show up. That’s why the priests who came out from Jerusalem to ask John the Baptist about himself, first asked, “Are you the Messiah?” He said, “No.” Then, “Are you Elijah?” He said, “No.” Finally, “Are you the prophet?” (And this is in John 1:19-23.) That prophet is the prophet here in Deuteronomy 18. That is the prophet that they were asking about, because the Jews did not believe it had happened, yet. They are still waiting for God to raise up a prophet among them like Moses.

So, if it is not Joshua, then to go further, we need to ask, “What does it mean, what does it really mean, to be a prophet like Moses?” Moses was everything for Israel. As a law giver and leader into battle, he executed the role of a king. As a priest he consecrated Aaron and Aaron’s sons. As a prophet he spoke the word of God. So, Moses is unique in all three roles of leadership. But this prophecy is speaking specifically about the role of prophet. “A prophet like me.”

So, what kind of prophet was Moses? Well, at the beginning of our Pentateuch series, we made a distinction between prophets who mediate new covenant and prophets who apply existing covenant to the people. There are only six covenant mediator prophets in the Bible: Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, David and Jesus. The other famous prophets, Elijah and Elisha and Nahum and Isaiah and Jeremiah, and so on, they all spoke the word of God to bring people into covenant obedience with God. They are covenant lawsuit prophets. But they didn’t bring new covenant.

The first covenant mediator prophet after Moses is David. But David is not really like Moses. Moses mediated covenant with all of God’s people. David had a very limited covenant. It was a covenant specifically with his house. So, the next covenant mediator prophet to rise up like Moses is the one who establishes a new covenant with all of Israel, with the people of God. That next covenant mediator prophet is Jesus.

The prophecy that God will rise up another covenant mediator prophet connects with the prophecy we looked at in our previous lesson in chapter 30 that after being exiled from the land, God would bring Israel back to the land and circumcise their hearts to love the Lord with heart and soul (30:6). So, both of these prophecies in Deuteronomy are pointing us ahead to the new covenant, foreshadowed by Moses, fulfilled in Jesus.

Before we get to that new covenant of Jesus, God has planned the period of Old Covenant. And during that period, we come to clearly see that God’s people cannot live consistently for him with a law handed down. God’s people desperately need a transformation of heart. They need a law that is working from the inside out. The Old Covenant period also shows that there is blessing with king, priest, and prophet in the ordering of society. But there are huge limitations to even the best of the human kings and priests and prophets. And we don’t even often get the best. We need a new kind of king, a God-man who will reign with unending justice and who will lay down his life to take our place. We need a new kind of high priest in the order of Melchizedek, one who stands sinless by the throne of God as he intercedes for God’s people, for us. And we need a new kind of covenant mediator prophet, one who not only speaks the name of God, but one who is the name of God, who can say, “If you have seen me, you have seen my Father in heaven.”

This central section of Deuteronomy, as we end our series on the Pentateuch, by looking at this central section of Deuteronomy, we are being pointed ahead in the years to come to the one true king, the one true priest, the one true prophet. It is one man. He has already come. And he is going to come again. He is our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Reflection Questions

1. Skim over the law code in Deuteronomy, chapters 12 through 26. Take note of the first and last verses. What are a few things that stand out to you in the law code as interesting or important or strange?
2. What do you think of the suggested chiastic ordering of the law code? Does that seem like a possible structure or not so much?
3. Read 15:4-8. How do you understand Moses comments about the poor? It is fair to say this is a tension between the ideal and the pragmatic reality that humans will not live up to the ideal?
4. How do you see the ordering of society and the ordering of individual lives, bringing about blessing and wealth in relationships and possessions?
5. What do you think about the suggest chiastic structure of 16:18-21:9? Does it seem accurate to you to say that the center of the law code is the law of king, priest, and prophet?
6. When you read the sections 18:9-22 and 13:1-5, what stands out to you about the nature of prophecy?
7. What are three things you would like to remember from your study of the Pentateuch?
8. What is one section of the Pentateuch you would especially like to study in more detail?