

Exodus: What We Mean When We Say God

Part 13: On Becoming a Treasured Possession

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Exodus 21-24

Review

God has rescued his people – the Israelite community – from their slavery in Egypt. We have seen some amazing, miraculous, mighty acts of God as he has worked to free his people.

And God has made a “covenant” – an agreement to love his people. Some of the details of his covenant people are found in the 10 Words, or teachings, or the 10 commandments as they are often called. And part of God’s covenant promise is that he will lead his people into the land he promised them.

Notice, while the first part of Exodus has been about getting his people out of Egypt, this next section is all about getting Egypt of his people; of making his people into his treasured possession as he leads them back to the land of their ancestors - to the promised land.

Responsibility

So far, the one thing required of God’s people is this – “Just trust me.” The people of Israel have had very little responsibility up to now. Even in the ten commandments, the main ask of them is that they adore him. God essentially says, “Love me as first and best – as I have loved you.”

But how? How does one love...God? How is a society supposed to structure itself in relation to the God who created this covenant – who makes these promises – who desires a love relationship with his people?

We see the answers emerging as we read Chapters 21-24, where God reveals more specifics of how his people are to live as he outlines some laws and rules.

Rules?

Sometimes some people tend to respond with suspicion or outrage when presented with rules in the Bible. However, without rules, limitations, and guidelines, life gets worse, not better.

The Children’s Center website states, “Learning what is expected of them in terms of behavior gives a child an understanding that their actions have an effect on those around them. Through discipline, children become emotionally mature, considerate people who can tolerate discomfort when necessary.”

It continues, “Contrary to the negative connotations of discipline, such as “punishment” or “controlling” the child, boundaries and limits actually help children feel more secure. Adherence to rules, expectations, and routines make things predictable. They reduce confusion and uncertainty, which in turn decreases anxiety.”

For a parent to love a child well, providing a framework of rules, expectations, rewards, and consequences is compulsory – and it gives the child direction and encouragement toward living life well, thriving, flourishing.

Similarly, when we read the Bible, it's important to remember that when we see instructions, they aren't there to limit us. Rather, God's word is given to us by a Father who deeply loves us and knows and wants what is best for us.

Read: Exodus 21-22

Confront the Elephant

You may be curious, confused, concerned, confounded, or queasy about some of the laws that are given to God's people. When we read through chapters 21-22, not everything we find there necessarily aligns with what we might expect God to ask of his people.

In fact, some of these instructions might set off alarm bells in our minds because they sound outdated, harsh, arbitrary or unjust.

- Why is it that the owner of a bull that habitually gores people is punishable by death only if the bull kills a free person, whereas if the bull kills a slave, the owner gets a reduced sentence? (Exo 21:29-32)
- Why does God legislate that masters are allowed to beat their slaves so long as they don't kill them? (Exo. 21:20-21)
- Why is killing a thief punishable if it takes place during the day, but not if it happens in the nighttime? (Exo 22:2-3)

What do we do when we find things in Scripture that don't fit into our sensibilities and expectations? – like AT ALL!

Do we tear these pages out of our Bibles? Or take a felt pen and cross them out? Flip a few pages further to find something relevant to us under the new covenant?

Or alternatively, do these verses get our feathers ruffled, and we subject the text to all of our current day questions and demand answers for the apparent injustices.

Let's consider that both approaches are flawed. Either of these responses are ways that we try to "explain away" the uncomfortable aspects of this text, trying to steer clear, or "tame this text" so that it is more suitable to our modern sensitivities.

It is completely legitimate for us as modern Christians to have problems with a text like this.

And here's why these things make us feel something between uncomfortable and outraged. Because the Bible itself has taught us to.

Using slavery as an example, it will come directly out of the Bible – later in the story – where the Bible critiques and corrects our thinking on slavery, paving the way for later Christians to abolish it – based on what the Bible says.

The Christian view of the world says that humanity, and the rest of the material world, *is created* – and is good. It says that we humans are all created in the image of God. This means that all human life has incredible, inherent worth.

So, what if, instead of deleting or attacking the parts that we feel are unnecessary or uncomfortable, we read them in an effort to hear this text, to take it on its own terms, try to understand it within its ancient context, and find out what it meant to the original audience, and what it might mean to us today.

What results from this is that we become better Bible readers – when instead of coming on our terms and only reading the comfy bits - or demanding that it answer all of our questions, we listen to what the text itself is trying to communicate.

And it's true, often, that means reading slowly, carefully, with an expectation to learn, and to be surprised sometimes. It means that when we stumble over something that is problematic for us, we don't ignore it or try to explain it away and we don't make demands of it. Rather, in humility, we allow the tension, and we keep reading. The story doesn't end there.

Consider God's Contrasting Contributions

Laws and codes of conduct are an important part of any civilization. This was not something unusual or specific to the people of Israel. In fact, much of the practical content of the law we find in chapters 21 and 22 is very similar among the nations of the Ancient Near East. For the most part, the leaders of every country desired to have order among the people – because an orderly society makes the leader look good and makes their job easier.

Most biblical scholars agree that Israel's legal literature, like what we find here in Exodus, was not original but rather, grew out of – or in response to - the already existing legal traditions of the surrounding nations.

So, here's the thing:

God meets us where we are,

But he doesn't leave us there.

What if we approach this passage from that perspective?

The people of Israel did not live in a vacuum. They were not completely sheltered from or unaware of the way people lived and functioned. They had spent around 400 years in Egypt – surrounded by their teaching and legal system, which would have undoubtedly influenced their thinking and behaviour. And also, they were just beginning to emerge out of the polytheistic beliefs that most of humanity embraced at that time.

Like a child learning to read, these people weren't ready for the master's master class. In fact, the Scriptures reveal that the law that comes through Moses here, was, in many ways, accommodating the people – meeting them where they were at. Here's just one example.

Read: Mark 10:2-9

Do you see what Jesus is saying? The law that comes through Moses is, in some regards, a “meet you where you're at” – and where they were at was, in Jesus own words, “hard-hearted.”

And no, he's not going to leave them there. He has already told them, "If you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession." This is God's desire for his people – but Rome wasn't built in a day – and God's people weren't either. He's still working on us.

So yes, in these chapters of Exodus, we see God meeting his people where they are – making accommodations and concessions at this point regarding things like slavery, retribution, and restitution for example, in accordance with what was normal in the ancient world. But as we'll see, God also raises the bar.

What's distinctive about God's covenant code is that the Biblical legislation calls for much more humane treatment and contrasts law codes of other ancient near east civilizations in these ways,

- concern with the sanctity of human life -

 - In how humans or animals who kill are dealt with,

- concern for the vulnerable -

 - In how God's code provides many more protective measures for widows and orphans

- concern for the poor –

 - With laws that better provide for the poor and curb a wide separation between the classes

- concern for the outsider –

 - Legislation for the care of ethnic minorities

- concern for the treatment of slaves -

 - God' gave them rights

- concern for the treatment of women -

 - Who were very vulnerable in this time in history – and God's code made stipulations to protect and provide for women.

What do we mean when we say God? Well, we mean a God who deeply values life – and cares for the vulnerable, the poor, the outsider, the mistreated, and calls his people to represent him by doing the same.

Read: Exodus 23-24

Here we see the distinctions intensify as we find specific commands to be honest, upright, to have integrity, and help others. Because it's true. Our actions absolutely have an effect on those around us.

As this passage progresses God is increasingly showing his people how to live as HIS people – and the hearers would notice the contrast between how they as God's people are called to live and how the other nations live. He is revealing what his treasured possession is to look like.

And notice – he doesn't say treasured possessions – plural – but rather, treasured possession – not just individuals who have a personal relationship with God - but a community that is in relationship with God and one another – a community that is noticeably different from the people around them – for the good of the people around them. Part of God's promise to his treasured possession, is that his people would be a blessing to all of the nations.

Remember

And then God says – Remember. Remember what it was like when you were oppressed as a foreigner in Egypt? Wasn't fun, was it? And remember me? - the God who delivered you – who met you where you were but didn't leave you there.

See, God has already freed his people – he met them where they were, as they were – and led them out – and it isn't until this encounter at Mt Sinai that he even addresses their character.

It seems humankind may have a tendency to believe that God won't accept us until we clean ourselves up. That somehow, we need to **EARN** God's approval and love.

But throughout the Scripture we see again and again that there's nothing we can do to earn God's favor.

Read: Romans 5:8

God's love is a gift - freely given to anyone who will receive. God meets us where we are – loves us as we are – and in his great love, invites us to respond – to trust Him – and to let him shape us into his treasured possession. This is true for the people that we're learning about in Exodus, and this is true for us today.

And he invites us - as his people - to remember him and his free gift – that we don't have to work to earn – and when we remember – that it is because of his great love that we are free – we allow him to shape us into his treasured possession – and we find rest for our souls. Sabbath rest.

God encourages his people to remember the Sabbath – and to celebrate together, giving ourselves completely to him – remembering him and representing him to the world around. But he doesn't leave us to fend for ourselves.

Contextualize

In Exodus 23, God promises to send an angel ahead of his people to guard them along the way and to bring them to the place he has prepared.

And in the gospel of John, chapter 14 – we read of Jesus, telling his followers that he is preparing a place for them – for us – and while he does so, he hasn't deserted us – his Holy Spirit – the very presence of God is with us, guarding us and guiding us along the way.

This story that we are studying in the book of Exodus is an ongoing story that we find continued in the Gospels and throughout the New Testament and it continues today.

The God who is revealing himself to the people of Israel is the same God who comes to dwell among his people in the person of Jesus Christ. And the covenant that is confirmed in Exodus 24 with sacrificial blood being poured out and sprinkled on the God's people is renewed with the sacrificial blood of Jesus that was shed out of his great love for us. God continues to show up and show himself to us.

Concede

God has never failed to live up to his end of the agreement. And he never will. And in his love, he helps us live up to our end of the agreement. Trust. Trust him. And as we learn to trust him, we learn Obedience.

And as we trust him, and obey him, we discover the goodness – and the freedom – and the privilege to be God's representatives to the watching world.

God calls his people out of 'worshipping their gods' – prioritizing the desires and behaviour of the world – and into God's design – becoming his treasured possession – those who bear his name.

In Carmen Imes' book, 'Bearing God's Name' she writes, "For the Israelite society to point others to Yahweh's character, they would need to reflect that character in all their relationships. That's the way God is shaping his people – at Sinai, at Summit, and throughout the world.

Imes encourages the reader to "Imagine a community where every member actively worked to love and protect their neighbour.

It's an ongoing process – with a relational Father God – who is present with his people - who came to earth to dwell among us in the person of Jesus the Son, and who continues to be present in his people as the Holy Spirit – and through His Spirit he develops the beautiful characteristics of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, faithfulness, and self-control in his people.

He isn't distant – he doesn't give us a divine checklist of do's and don'ts and leave it up to us to color in the boxes. He works in us – in us as individuals and us as a community of his people – and he shapes us into a noticeably 'different' people. Where those around us begin to recognize, "there is something different about these people. They treat each other better. They treat everyone better.

And God does this out of love – for us – and for all that he has made.

We are his treasured possession – who have the privilege of bearing God's name.

Discussion and Reflection

Open Up

What are some real-life examples of how you have seen 'the church' (be it Summit Drive, or another church or ministry) have a really positive impact on the surrounding community?

Dig In

Read **Colossians 3:1-14** together.

- a) What challenges do you recognize as you strive to 'set your minds on things above' and 'put to death whatever belongs to your earthly nature'?
- b) In what ways have you noticed growth in yourself, or in a loved one – 'taking off your old self with its practices and putting on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator'?
- c) How does thinking of yourself as 'God's chosen people' or his 'Treasured Possession' encourage you as you live into and out of this vocation?
- d) Imagine a community where every member actively worked to love and protect their neighbour. How can we contribute to that this week?

Pray

Pray together now – and commit to praying for one another in the days to come – That each of us would KNOW that God's desire for us is BEST – And that we would continually allow him an All-Access pass to our lives. Meeting us where we are – and leading and shaping us to look more and more like him.