

A Daily Devotional on the Book of Exodus

By Ken Miller

WEEK 7 READING



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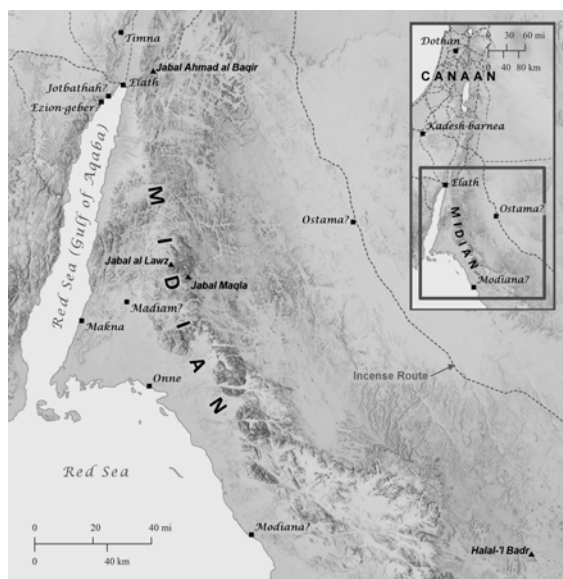
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Proof Positive

¹ Jethro, the priest of Midian, Moses' father-in-law, heard of all that God had done for Moses and for Israel his people, how the Lord had brought Israel out of Egypt. ² Now Jethro, Moses' father-in-law, had taken Zipporah, Moses' wife, after he had sent her home, ³ along with her two sons. The name of the one was Gershom (for he said, "I have been a sojourner in a foreign land"), ⁴ and the name of the other, Eliezer (for he said, "The God of my father was my help, and delivered me from the sword of Pharaoh"). ⁵ Jethro, Moses' father-in-law, came with his sons and his wife to Moses in the wilderness where he was encamped at the mountain of God. ⁶ And when he sent word to Moses, "I, your father-in-law Jethro, am coming to you with your wife and her two sons with her," ⁷ Moses went out to meet his father-in-law and bowed down and kissed him. And they asked each other of their welfare and went into the tent. ⁸ Then Moses told his father-in-law all that the Lord had done to Pharaoh and to the Egyptians for Israel's sake, all the hardship that had come upon them in the way, and how the Lord had delivered them. ⁹ And Jethro rejoiced for all the good that the Lord had done to Israel, in that he had delivered them out of the hand of the Egyptians.

¹⁰ Jethro said, "Blessed be the Lord, who has delivered you out of the hand of the Egyptians and out of the hand of Pharaoh and has delivered the people from under the hand of the Egyptians. ¹¹ Now I know that the Lord is greater than all gods, because in this affair they dealt arrogantly with the people." ¹² And Jethro, Moses' father-in-law, brought a burnt offering and sacrifices to God; and Aaron came with all the elders of Israel to eat bread with Moses' father-in-law before God. – Exodus 18:1-12 ESV



Years earlier, Moses had been forced to flee Egypt after news of his murder of an Egyptian became known to Pharaoh. With a bounty on his head, Moses sought refuge in the land of Midian, located on the eastern side of the Red Sea or Gulf of Aqaba. There, he met the daughter of a man who is described as "the priest of Midian" (Exodus 2:16 ESV). This man's name was Jethro and we know very little about him, other than what we are told in chapter 18 of Exodus. His designation as a "priest" doesn't necessarily mean that he was a follower of Yahweh.

According to the book of Genesis, the Midianites were descendants of Abraham.

Abraham took another wife, whose name was Keturah. She bore him Zimran, Jokshan, Medan, Midian, Ishbak, and Shuah. – Genesis 25:1-2 ESV

Abraham married Keturah after the death of Sarah. So, Jethro would have been from the line of Abraham. As such, he could have been a Yahweh worshiper, but the text does not clearly state his religious allegiance. He could just as easily have been serving as a priest to one of the many foreign deities worshiped among the nations that populated that region of the world. According to Numbers 22, the Midianites later joined forces with the Moabites in an attempt to prevent the advancement of the Israelites into their territories.

During the period of the judges, “marauders from Midian, Amalek, and the people of the east would attack Israel, camping in the land and destroying crops as far away as Gaza. They left the Israelites with nothing to eat, taking all the sheep, goats, cattle, and donkeys” (Judges 6:3-4 NLT). So, it would seem that there was no love affair between the Israelites and the Midianites, and it appears unlikely that they shared a common belief in Yahweh.

Yet, Jethro, the father-in-law of Moses received word above all that the God of Israel had been doing on behalf of His people. This priest was blown away by all that he heard and was anxious to see for himself if any of the rumors were true.

When Moses had answered God’s call and departed Midian to return to Egypt, he had begun the journey with Zipporah and the boys in tow. But somewhere along the way, he made the decision to send them back to live with Jethro.

Earlier, Moses had sent his wife, Zipporah, and his two sons back to Jethro, who had taken them in. – Exodus 18:2 NLT

Now, as Jethro made his plans to join Moses in the wilderness of Sinai, he decided to bring Zipporah, Gershom, and Eliezer with him. The small family made the trek from Midian to “the mountain of God” (Exodus 18:5 ESV). This is a reference to Mount Sinai, where Moses would later receive the Ten Commandments from God. After their victory over the Amalekites, Moses and the Israelites had made their way from Rephidim to the valley below Mount Sinai. And it was there that Jethro, Zipporah, and her sons were reunited with Moses.

Jethro was anxious to hear all about the events that had taken place in Egypt, so he sat down and listened as Moses regaled him with all the details concerning the plagues, the parting of the Red Sea, the manna, the quail, the water-producing rock, and the victory over the Amalekites. And Jethro was blown away.

Jethro was delighted when he heard about all the good things the Lord had done for Israel as he rescued them from the hand of the Egyptians. – Exodus 18:9 NLT

Once again, it is unclear whether Jethro served as a priest of Yahweh or of a false god. But as he hears Moses recount the miraculous acts of God, he cannot help but acknowledge and honor the name of Yahweh. He even discloses his belief in the superiority of Yahweh over any other gods.

*“Praise the Lord,” Jethro said, “for he has rescued you from the Egyptians and from Pharaoh. Yes, he has rescued Israel from the powerful hand of Egypt! **I know now** that the Lord is greater than all other gods, because he rescued his people from the oppression of the proud Egyptians.” – Exodus 18:10-11 NLT*

Notice that Jethro discloses his new outlook on the God of the Israelites. It was after hearing the report from Moses that his perspective on Yahweh was radically changed. Before hearing all that happened in Egypt, Jethro seems to have believed that Yahweh was just another God among many gods. But his view of Yahweh’s superiority and sovereignty had been radically altered by the testimony of Moses.

At this point, Jethro the priest was so moved by what he heard, that he determined to present an offering to the God of Israel.

Then Jethro, Moses’ father-in-law, brought a burnt offering and sacrifices to God. Aaron and all the elders of Israel came out and joined him in a sacrificial meal in God’s presence. – Exodus 18:12 NLT

It is important to note that Jethro has been repeatedly referred to as “the priest of Midian,” and not “the priest of Yahweh.” It is only after hearing from Moses the “good news” concerning the actions of Yahweh, the all-powerful God of Israel, that Jethro is moved to present an offering to this far superior deity.

It seems likely that Jethro, as a descendant of Abraham, had a working understanding about the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. But he had no reason to believe that this God was any better than the gods of the Midianites, Amorites, or Canaanites. Yet now, he had been persuaded to change his opinion. The God of Israel was the bigger, better God. He had no equal. And He deserved to be worshiped.

At this offertory meal, a Midianite joined an Israelite in the worship of Yahweh, the one true God. A man who represented one of the future enemies of Israel had heard the good news concerning Israel’s God and presented an offering of praise and worship. And this scene echoes the words that God has repeated throughout the opening chapters of Exodus.

“By this you shall know that I am the Lord...” – Exodus 17:7 ESV

Good Counsel, Well Received

¹³ The next day Moses sat to judge the people, and the people stood around Moses from morning till evening. ¹⁴ When Moses' father-in-law saw all that he was doing for the people, he said, "What is this that you are doing for the people? Why do you sit alone, and all the people stand around you from morning till evening?" ¹⁵ And Moses said to his father-in-law, "Because the people come to me to inquire of God; ¹⁶ when they have a dispute, they come to me and I decide between one person and another, and I make them know the statutes of God and his laws." ¹⁷ Moses' father-in-law said to him, "What you are doing is not good. ¹⁸ You and the people with you will certainly wear yourselves out, for the thing is too heavy for you. You are not able to do it alone. ¹⁹ Now obey my voice; I will give you advice, and God be with you! You shall represent the people before God and bring their cases to God, ²⁰ and you shall warn them about the statutes and the laws, and make them know the way in which they must walk and what they must do. ²¹ Moreover, look for able men from all the people, men who fear God, who are trustworthy and hate a bribe, and place such men over the people as chiefs of thousands, of hundreds, of fifties, and of tens. ²² And let them judge the people at all times. Every great matter they shall bring to you, but any small matter they shall decide themselves. So it will be easier for you, and they will bear the burden with you. ²³ If you do this, God will direct you, you will be able to endure, and all this people also will go to their place in peace."

²⁴ So Moses listened to the voice of his father-in-law and did all that he had said. ²⁵ Moses chose able men out of all Israel and made them heads over the people, chiefs of thousands, of hundreds, of fifties, and of tens. ²⁶ And they judged the people at all times. Any hard case they brought to Moses, but any small matter they decided themselves. ²⁷ Then Moses let his father-in-law depart, and he went away to his own country. – Exodus 18:13-27 ESV

Like any father-in-law, Jethro wanted to see how his daughter's husband performed "on the job." So, the next morning, he followed Moses as he headed into the "office" – where Moses began a dawn-to-dusk session of judging the affairs and disputes of the people.

Moses took his seat to hear the people's disputes against each other. They waited before him from morning till evening. – Exodus 18:13 NLT

This scene must have come as a shock to Jethro, because the last time he had seen Moses, his son-in-law had been herding sheep in Midian. Now, he was managing the affairs of what was essentially a small nation. Every day, countless people made their way to Moses, where they lined up and waited for their turn to present their cases to the one and only judge qualified to settle their disputes.

Moses was a prophet who had been given the authority to speak on behalf of God Himself. It's important to remember that at this time in their journey, the people of Israel had no written code of conduct or official compendium of laws to govern life and settle disputes. So, Moses was the only individual within the whole Israelite community who could adjudicate any

disagreements and provide godly insights or a possible solution to the interpersonal conflicts taking place. Moses put his role this way:

“...the people come to me to get a ruling from God. When a dispute arises, they come to me, and I am the one who settles the case between the quarreling parties. I inform the people of God’s decrees and give them his instructions.” – Exodus 18:15-16 NLT

Moses wasn’t just dispensing sage wisdom and helpful advice; he was delivering personalized judgments from the throne of God in heaven. Part of what made the length of Moses’ days so long was the sheer number of cases that needed to be heard, assessed, and litigated. And it must have taken time to hear the oral arguments of each party in the dispute. It could also be that Moses was required to take each matter to the Lord and then wait for a specific answer to be returned. This would have been a time-consuming and highly exhausting process.

So, when Jethro observed how Moses spent his days, he was more than a bit surprised. His initial thought was that this entire scenario was absurd. How could one man possibly hope to handle such a demanding volume of cases? He saw that Moses was headed for a mental or physical meltdown if something didn’t change, and quickly. So, like a good father-in-law, he pulled Moses aside and tried to set him straight.

“What are you really accomplishing here? Why are you trying to do all this alone while everyone stands around you from morning till evening?” – Exodus 18:14 NLT

None of this made any sense to Jethro. As a priest, he fully understood the concept of one man serving the needs of others, but this was lunacy. The volume of cases Moses was trying to handle on his own was beyond the scope of one man – even with God’s divine assistance. That led Jethro to deliver a no-holds-barred assessment of Moses’ leadership strategy, and it was anything but flattering.

“This is not good!” Moses’ father-in-law exclaimed. “You’re going to wear yourself out—and the people, too. This job is too heavy a burden for you to handle all by yourself.” – Exodus 18:17-18 NLT

In essence, Jethro told Moses, “You’re a train wreck waiting to happen. And it’s not a matter of *if*, but *when*.” From Jethro’s perspective, his overly-eager son-in-law was headed for an emotional, mental, or physical breakdown. This led him to give Moses some unsolicited free advice; counsel was likely motivated more by his concern for his daughter and grandsons than for Moses himself. Jethro had just reunited Zipporah with her husband and he was not anxious to see her become a young widow because of Moses’ refusal to delegate responsibilities to qualified men.

So, he advised Moses to share the load – for his own good.

“You should continue to be the people’s representative before God, bringing their disputes to him. Teach them God’s decrees, and give them his instructions. Show them how to conduct their lives.” – Exodus 18:19-20 NLT

Jethro wasn’t trying to change Moses’ job description, but he simply suggested a reprioritization of his roles. It’s unlikely that every case Moses heard required God’s input. There were probably some that Moses could settle on his own through the use of common sense. So, Jethro suggested that Moses recruit qualified men who could hear and settle the simpler cases while forwarding the more complicated disputes to Moses.

“...select from all the people some capable, honest men who fear God and hate bribes. Appoint them as leaders over groups of one thousand, one hundred, fifty, and ten. They should always be available to solve the people’s common disputes, but have them bring the major cases to you.” – Exodus 18:21-22 NLT

Jethro was recommending the time-tested strategy of delegation. As the sole mediator between God and the Israelite community, Moses was too vital to spend his time trying to settle every petty dispute that came up among the people. He needed to focus on the bigger issues and allow others to lighten his load by filtering out the more run-of-the-mill problems that didn’t require divine intervention.

Jethro outlined a detailed conflict resolution strategy involving a tiered network of judges and counselors who serve on behalf of Moses. The whole idea was for Moses to “the leaders decide the smaller matters themselves” (Exodus 18:22 NLT). This wasn’t rocket science. Jethro was recommending a simple organizational restructuring plan that would spread the load and spare Moses from burnout. And Jethro assured Moses that Yahweh would give this new approach His Good Housekeeping seal of approval

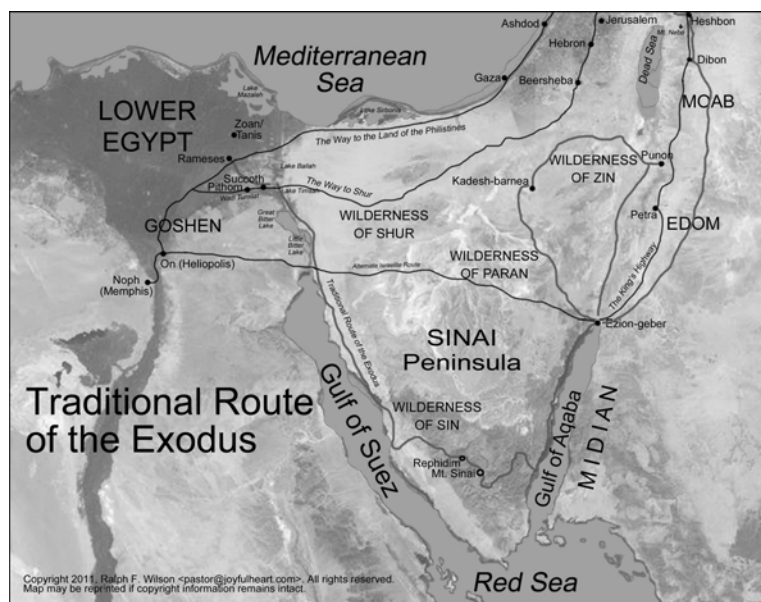
“If you do this, God will direct you, you will be able to endure, and all this people also will go to their place in peace.” – Exodus 18:23 ESV

Moses wisely heeded his father-in-law’s advice and implemented this new conflict resolution strategy, and according to the text, it all worked like a charm. The newly appointed leaders did their jobs and, as a result, Moses got a new lease on life. The valuable bandwidth he had lost was restored and, in the end, it proved to be a win-win situation for all involved.

Things Are About to Get Serious

¹ On the third new moon after the people of Israel had gone out of the land of Egypt, on that day they came into the wilderness of Sinai. ² They set out from Rephidim and came into the wilderness of Sinai, and they encamped in the wilderness. There Israel encamped before the mountain, ³ while Moses went up to God. The Lord called to him out of the mountain, saying, “Thus you shall say to the house of Jacob, and tell the people 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 therefore, if you will indeed obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession among all 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 people of Israel.”

⁷ So Moses came and called the elders of the people and set before them all these words that the Lord had commanded him. ⁸ All the people answered together and said, “All that the Lord has spoken we will do.” And Moses reported the words of the people to the Lord. ⁹ And the Lord said to Moses, “Behold, I am coming to you in a thick cloud, that the people may hear when I speak with you, and may also believe you forever.” – Exodus 19:1-9 ESV



Three months after leaving the land of Egypt, the people of Israel arrived at “the mountain of God” in the wilderness of Sinai. This event marks a major turning point in the story of God’s people. For them, it was just another trip from one obscure place in the wilderness to another. As they continued their long journey from Egypt to Canaan they made several stops along the way, and each had been marked by its own unique and memorable moment of divine intervention.

Three days into their journey, the people became anxious because their provision of water was running low. At Marah, in the middle of the wilderness of Shur, they discovered a water source, but it was unfit for consumption. So, frustrated by this unacceptable situation, they turned their anger on Moses. But God intervened and miraculously transformed the bitter water at Marah into a refreshing, life-giving source of sustenance. And it was there that God gave them a command:

“If you will diligently obey the Lord your God, and do what is right in his sight, and pay attention to his commandments, and keep all his statutes, then all the diseases that I

brought on the Egyptians I will not bring on you, for I, the Lord, am your healer.” – Exodus 15:26 NLT

At this point in their relationship with Yahweh, He had given them no written commands to obey. They had simply been instructed to follow His lead as the pillar of cloud guided them through the wilderness. But the bitter water at Marah had been a test to see if they would trust God. Their fear and frustration at finding the water to be undrinkable gave evidence that they didn't trust God to provide for all their needs.

And their tendency to doubt God's capacity to provide continued as they entered the wilderness of Sin. There they angrily vocalized their concern over their diminishing bread supply, and God had responded by providing "bread from heaven" (Exodus 16:4 ESV) along with a daily diet of quail. And that miracle was accompanied by a strict set of rules from God.

“This is what the Lord has commanded: ‘Gather of it, each one of you, as much as he can eat. You shall each take an omer, according to the number of the persons that each of you has in his tent.’” And the people of Israel did so. They gathered, some more, some less. – Exodus 16:16-17 ESV

And the people were forbidden from hoarding any of the bread. God would provide exactly what they needed for each day – nothing more, nothing less. But on the sixth day, they were commanded to gather twice as much so that they would have enough for the seventh day, a day that God had deemed as “a day of solemn rest, a holy Sabbath to the Lord” (Exodus 16:23 ESV). But when that seventh day arrived, some of the people disobeyed God's command and went out in search of manna, only to find that none was available. And God expressed His anger in no uncertain terms.

“How long will you refuse to keep my commandments and my laws? See! The Lord has given you the Sabbath; therefore on the sixth day he gives you bread for two days. Remain each of you in his place; let no one go out of his place on the seventh day.” – Exodus 16:28-29 ESV

Not long after this, at a place called Rephidim, the people's lack of faith got exposed again. Unable to find a source of water in this arid region, the Israelites expressed their dissatisfaction with Moses, even accusing him of trying to kill them. But God graciously intervened again, providing them with life-giving water from a rock.

Now, the people find themselves encamped at the base of a mountain in the middle of the Sinai wilderness. To them, this was just another mountain in the middle of nowhere. But for Moses, it was a return to a very familiar place and a reminder of the promise he had received from God. It was at this very spot that Moses had seen the burning bush and heard the voice of God. That divine encounter had been a game-changer for Moses, transforming him from a reclusive shepherd of sheep to God's divine agent of deliverance. There, at Mount Sinai, Moses had received his commission to deliver the people of Israel from their captivity in Egypt and lead

them to the land of promise. And God had assured Moses that he would one day return to that very spot with the people of Israel in tow.

*“I will be with you, and this shall be the sign for you, that I have sent you: when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall serve God on this mountain.” – Exodus 3:12
ESV*

Now that promise was being fulfilled. Upon their arrival at Sinai, the people set up camp at the base of the mountain, while Moses made his way to the top. He somehow knew that he had another divine appointment with God Almighty. And, as before, Moses heard the voice of God calling to him.

“Thus you will tell the house of Jacob, and declare to the people of Israel: ⁴ ‘You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt and how I lifted you on eagles’ wings and brought you to myself. And now, if you will diligently listen to me and keep my covenant, then you will be my special possession out of all the nations, for all the earth is mine, and you will be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.’ These are the words that you will speak to the Israelites.” – Exodus 19:3-6 NLT

God gave Moses a message for the people of Israel. He wanted them to understand the significance of what He had done for them. It was essential that they grasp the greatness of the gift they had received. Their deliverance had not been their own doing. The plagues that had come upon their captors were manifestations of God’s divine judgment. The people of Israel were now free people, but they owed that freedom to God. And they also owed Him their allegiance and obedience.

God was preparing to set them apart as His kingdom of priests and a holy nation. But that lofty position came with conditions. Any hope they had of enjoying status as His special possession was tied directly to their willingness to live according to His will. This entire message from God is a conditional statement that communicates God’s uncompromising expectation of the people of Israel. The if-then nature of God’s message is meant to communicate that their special status as His chosen people will come with non-negotiable conditions.

God was setting the people of Israel apart. From this point forward, they would be distinctively different than all the other nations of the earth. They were to become God’s people, living according to God’s will and in keeping with His commands. God refers to them as “a holy nation.”

The word “holy” is *qāḏōš* (קָדוֹשׁ) in Hebrew, and it can mean “sacred, separate, or set apart.” God was letting the Israelites know that their deliverance from Egypt had a purpose. There was a reason why God had set them free, and its significance was far greater than they currently realized. God had great things in store for them, but it was going to require that they embrace their distinctiveness and readily adopt God’s standards of behavior. Moral purity and conformity to His will would be mandatory.

Little did they know that God was about to give them His non-negotiable rules of conduct. They loved the idea of becoming a kingdom of priests and a holy nation but had no way of understanding the burden that would accompany that lofty status. So, when Moses returned from the mountaintop and delivered God's message to the people, they eagerly and enthusiastically replied, "All that the Lord has spoken we will do" (Exodus 19:8 ESV).

What would happen next would be a game-changing moment for the people of Israel. Nothing they had witnessed up to this point had prepared them for what they were about to experience at Mount Sinai. The plagues, the parting of the Red Sea, manna, water from a rock, the defeat of the Amalekites – nothing would come close to the spectacle they were about to witness from their vantage point in the valley of Sinai. God was about to reveal Himself in all His terrifying and jaw-dropping glory. The familiar pillar of cloud that had led them through the wilderness was going to transform itself into a dense and foreboding storm cloud, accompanied by flashing lightning and loud thunder. God was about to make Himself known and it would be an unforgettable experience.

Enter At Your Own Risk

⁹ When Moses told the words of the people to the Lord, ¹⁰ the Lord said to Moses, “Go to the people and consecrate them today and tomorrow, and let them wash their garments ¹¹ and 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 And you shall set limits for the people all around, saying, ‘Take care not to go up into the mountain or touch the edge of it. Whoever touches the mountain shall be put to death. ¹³ No hand shall touch him, but he shall be stoned or shot; whether beast or man, he shall not live.’ When the trumpet 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. ¹⁵ And he said to the people, “Be ready for the third day; do not go near a woman.”

¹⁶ On the morning of the third day there were thunders and lightnings and a thick cloud on the mountain and a very loud trumpet blast, so that all the people in the camp trembled. ¹⁷ Then Moses brought the people out of the camp to meet God, and they took their stand at the foot of the mountain. ¹⁸ Now Mount Sinai was wrapped in smoke because the Lord had descended on it in fire. The smoke of it went up like the smoke of a kiln, and the whole mountain trembled greatly. ¹⁹ And as the sound of the trumpet grew louder and louder, Moses spoke, and God answered him in 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.

²¹ And the Lord said to Moses, “Go down and warn the people, lest they break through to the Lord to look and many of them perish. ²² Also let the priests who come near to the Lord consecrate themselves, lest the Lord break out against them.” ²³ And Moses said to the Lord, “The people cannot come up to Mount Sinai, for you yourself warned us, saying, ‘Set limits around the mountain and consecrate it.’” ²⁴ And the Lord said to him, “Go down, and come up bringing Aaron with you. But do not let the priests and the people break through to come up to the Lord, lest he break out against them.” ²⁵ So Moses went down to the people and told them. – Exodus 19:9-25 ESV

When Moses informed the people that they were going to be God’s treasured possession and “a kingdom of priests and a holy nation” (Exodus 19:6 ESV) they were thrilled. They were even willing to give their enthusiastic and heartfelt affirmation of God’s command to obey His voice and keep His covenant.

“All that the Lord has spoken we will do.” – Exodus 19:8 ESV

This must have sounded like music to the ears of the man who had repeatedly felt the brunt of their anger as they complained about everything from the lack of water to the scarcity of bread. That they would so readily agree to obey God must have thrilled Moses, so he was anxious to report this good news back up the food chain.

But it seems that God had a few doubts concerning the people's commitment to keeping their word. So, He gave Moses instructions to prepare the people for an up-close and personal encounter with their God.

*“Go down and prepare the people for my arrival. **Consecrate them** today and tomorrow, and have them wash their clothing. Be sure they are ready on the third day, for on that day the Lord will come down on Mount Sinai as all the people watch.” – Exodus 19:10-11 NLT*



Four separate times in this passage, some version of the word, “consecrate” is used. In Hebrew, it is the word *קָדַשׁ* (*qāḏaš*), which means “to sanctify, set apart, separate, or make holy.” God gave Moses instructions to prepare the people to meet with Him. This conveys the idea that they were not ready to come into God’s presence. While God had promised to set them apart as His own, they needed to know that

they were not in a proper moral state to come before a holy and sinless God. In a sense, they were too poorly clothed to come into the presence of the King. So, God had Moses tell them to clean up their act, even ordering that they wash their clothes and abstain from sexual intercourse for the next three days.

This entire episode was designed to teach the people a valuable lesson concerning the holiness of God. He was the transcendent God of the universe, the creator of heaven and earth. They could not treat Him as they had Moses. He would not tolerate the disrespectful and disobedient ways in which they had approached His servant. He was God Almighty and worthy of honor and reverence. And just so the people understood the danger of dismissing His holiness, God had Moses create a boundary around the base of Mount Sinai, designed to prevent the people from getting too close to His glory.

“Mark off a boundary all around the mountain. Warn the people, ‘Be careful! Do not go up on the mountain or even touch its boundaries. Anyone who touches the mountain will certainly be put to death.’” – Exodus 19:12 NLT

Up until this point, the only interaction the people had with God was through the voice of Moses or through the presence of the pillar of cloud. Their knowledge of Him was limited. In their experience, God was a disembodied entity who chose to speak through a human

surrogate and manifest Himself through a cloud-like apparition. They had never heard His voice or seen Him face to face. But that was about to change.

For three days, the people prepared and, during that time, they avoided going anywhere near the mountain for fear of death. Then the big day arrived when the ram's horn was blown and the people made their way to Mount Sinai. There before them stood the mountain of God, covered by a dark storm cloud from which came flashes of lightning and the deafening sound of thunder.

All of Mount Sinai was covered with smoke because the Lord had descended on it in the form of fire. The smoke billowed into the sky like smoke from a brick kiln, and the whole mountain shook violently. – Exodus 19:18 ESV

The scene left the people in a state of abject fear. They had never seen anything like this before. The majesty and might of God were on full display and had their intended effect – “all the people in the camp trembled” (Exodus 19:16 ESV). They were left in a state of fearful awe and wonder at the power of God's presence. This was not the innocent-looking cloud that had led them through the wilderness. It was not the light-giving pillar of fire that had illuminated their camp at night. This was the earth-shaking, ear-splitting presence of the transcendent, all-powerful God of the universe. He had come down to earth and was demonstrating His glory and greatness for all to see and hear.

And the people watched in wonder as Moses made his way up the mountain and into the midst of the storm cloud of God's presence. At that moment, no one wanted to switch places with Moses. They were all too glad to remain safely ensconced in the valley and allow Moses to take all the risks.

But when Moses entered God's presence, he was surprised to hear what the Almighty had to say.

“Go back down and warn the people not to break through the boundaries to see the Lord, or they will die. Even the priests who regularly come near to the Lord must purify themselves so that the Lord does not break out and destroy them.” – Exodus 19:21-22 NLT

To Moses, this all sounded redundant and unnecessary. God had already commanded him to create a boundary around the base of the mountain and, in their current state of fear, it was highly unlikely that anyone was going to attempt to breach that barrier.

But the omniscient God knew something Moses was ignorant of – the people would always be tempted to treat His holiness with disrespect and disregard. Their fear would eventually turn to familiarity that bordered on complacency. In time, they would lose their fear of God and learn to take Him for granted. But God wanted them to know that He was unapproachable and off-limits for any who attempted to come into His presence in an unworthy or impure state.

God knew that the boundary Moses had placed around the base of the mountain would not hold back the people forever. Eventually, they would become curious and want to venture into God's presence uninvited and in an unworthy state. But because of His holiness, that would prove to be an unwise and unhealthy decision.

God wanted His people to know that their status as His treasured possession did not give them the right to come into His presence flippantly or arrogantly. While He had set them apart as His own, they remained impure and unworthy of entering His presence. Their sinful state would keep them separated from God. Without proper cleansing, they could not expect to enter into the joy of God's presence.

With the rules fully established, God commanded Moses to go back down the mountain and return with Aaron. But no one else was allowed to approach God's presence without facing the penalty of death.

"Go down and bring Aaron back up with you. In the meantime, do not let the priests or the people break through to approach the Lord, or he will break out and destroy them."

– Exodus 19:24 NLT

What happens next is critical. Aaron and Moses will return to the top of the mountain, where they will receive the commandments of God. Years earlier, on this very same mountain, Moses heard the voice of God coming out of the burning bush. On that occasion, God had given him instructions concerning the deliverance of the people of Israel from their captivity in Egypt. Now, God was going to provide Moses with instructions regarding their conduct as His treasured possession. Now that they were free, how were they to live? What were the rules of conduct that would guide their behavior and set them apart as God's chosen people?

God was not going to leave their actions up to them. He was going to make it perfectly and painfully clear how they were to behave as His kingdom of priests and a holy nation. Nothing would be left up to the imagination. They had readily agreed to obey His commands. Now, they were going to discover the demanding code of conduct they had signed up to keep.

God's Sovereignty Versus Man's Autonomy

¹And God spoke all these words, saying,

²"I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.

³"You shall have no other gods before me." – Exodus 20:1-3 ESV

All the way back in the garden of Eden, an epic battle took place when Satan, in the guise of a wily serpent, tempted Eve to eat the fruit of the one tree that God had declared to be off limits.

"You may surely eat of every tree of the garden, but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die." – Genesis 2:16-17 ESV

God placed a prohibition on consuming the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil that carried the penalty of death for its violation. But when Eve encountered the cleverly-disguised enemy of God in the garden, he raised doubts about God's commands.

"Did God actually say, 'You shall not eat of any tree in the garden'?" – Genesis 3:1 ESV

He began by purposely twisting the words of God, in an attempt to confuse his prey. And Eve attempted to correct his seeming misstatement but ended up misrepresenting what God had said regarding the tree.

*"We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden, but God said, 'You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the midst of the garden, **neither shall you touch it**, lest you die.'" – Genesis 3:2-3 ESV*

Satan, sensing Eve's obvious confusion, used this opportunity to question God's motivation for giving the command in the first place. He raised doubts about God's intentions, in the hopes of casting aspersions about God's integrity.

"You will not surely die. For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil." – Genesis 3:4-5 ESV

At that moment, Eve was faced with a decision. The serpent was offering her the chance to be her own god. By eating the forbidden fruit, she would gain insight and knowledge that would allow her to be autonomous and self-determining. She could decide what was best for herself. She would become the captain of her own ship and the master of her own fate. The capacity to know good and evil meant that she would be able to determine her own actions and outcomes. She could create her own laws, deciding for herself what was acceptable and unacceptable. The only rules she would have to live by were the ones she created.

As the woman considered her options, she was persuaded by the rhetoric of the serpent and the tantalizing allure of the forbidden fruit – and she gave in to her base desires. She ate the fruit and shared it with her husband. And at that fateful moment, a battle began that has continued for millennia. The man and woman whom God had created decided that they were better off being their own gods. They chose autonomy over God’s sovereignty, and it wasn’t long before they became self-obsessed with self-rule. With their decision to disobey the law of God, the first couple ushered in the age of self-determination, and within a relatively short period of time, their descendants displayed the dark destination that lay at the end of that path.

The Lord saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intention of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually. – Genesis 6:5 ESV

That sad state of affairs resulted in God destroying every human being who lived on the planet, except for one man and his family. In the midst of all that darkness and sin, one man is singled out.

But Noah found favor in the eyes of the Lord. – Genesis 6:8 ESV

While every other human being on the planet had taken the path of self-rule, Noah had determined to remain under God’s rule. He is described as “a righteous man, blameless in his generation” (Genesis 6:9 ESV). He wasn’t sinless or perfect, but he exhibited a desire to live according to God’s will rather than his own.

Noah walked with God. – Genesis 6:9 ESV

This is the same statement made about another man who happens to be a predecessor of Noah.

Enoch walked with God... – Genesis 5:22 ESV

Both men “walked” with God. The Hebrew word is הָלַךְ (*hālak*) and, in this context, it carries the idea of living life or conducting one’s life in keeping with God’s will. While everyone else around them was doing what was right in their own eyes, Enoch and Noah were swimming against the tide and walking in lockstep with God.

Noah had followed in the footsteps of his godly ancestor, and his faithfulness to God resulted in his salvation by God. When the flood came upon the earth, Noah and his family were spared death and given a new opportunity to “be fruitful and multiply, increase greatly on the earth and multiply in it” (Genesis 9:7 ESV). And they did. But the results were no less disappointing than before.

From Noah and his three sons would come a new, but not improved, mankind. Their descendants would begin to multiply but rather than keep God's command to fill the earth, they chose to remain at a place called Babel and erect a monument to their own significance.

“Come, let’s build a great city for ourselves with a tower that reaches into the sky. This will make us famous and keep us from being scattered all over the world.” – Genesis 11:4 NLT

Rather than obey God, they chose to follow their own desires and satisfy their own sense of self-importance. But God put an end to their arrogant display of autonomy by confusing their languages. No longer able to communicate or cooperate, the people disbanded and spread out all over the face of the world, and some ended up in a place called Ur, including a man named Terah. And this one man would have a son who would play a major role in the future of mankind.

Terah fathered Abram, Nahor, and Haran; and Haran fathered Lot. Haran died in the presence of his father Terah in the land of his kindred, in Ur of the Chaldeans. – Genesis 11:27-28 ESV

This foreign-speaking, idol-worshiping pagan from the land of Mesopotamia, would become the father of the patriarch of God's chosen people. Abram would be God's choice for another reboot of the system. The last time, God chose a man named Noah who was righteous and walked with Him. This time, God chose a pagan who worshiped false gods and who had no concept of what it meant to walk with the one true God. This man would be the future hope of the world. This man would receive a personal invitation and a powerful promise from God that would dramatically alter the moral landscape of humanity.

“Leave your native country, your relatives, and your father’s family, and go to the land that I will show you. I will make you into a great nation. I will bless you and make you famous, and you will be a blessing to others. I will bless those who bless you and curse those who treat you with contempt. All the families on earth will be blessed through you.” – Genesis 12:1-3 NLT

With the invitation extended and the promise stated Abram had a choice to make. He could remain where he was and live out his life in Ur, or he could obey this newly revealed deity and move his family all the way to a land he had never seen or heard of. And Genesis 12 reveals that “Abram went, as the Lord had told him” (Genesis 12:4 ESV). He did as God commanded. In other words, he walked with God. He followed in the footsteps of Enoch and Noah, living his life in keeping with the will of God.

The book of Hebrews includes Abram's name in the great “Hall of Faith,” where the lives of various Old Testament saints are memorialized for their faithful adherence to God's revealed will. Abram is described as an obedient servant of God who trusted in the faithfulness of God to keep His promises.

By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to a place that he was to receive as an inheritance. And he went out, not knowing where he was going. By faith he went to live in the land of promise, as in a foreign land, living in tents with Isaac and Jacob, heirs with him of the same promise. – Hebrews 11:8-9 ESV

And from this one man came the nation of Israel. God had promised to produce a great nation from this one man, despite the fact that Abram was 75 years old when God called him in Ur. And to make matters worse, this man's elderly wife was barren. But God fulfilled His promise to Abram. His grandson, Jacob, would eventually lead his small clan of 70 people into the land of Egypt to escape a famine in the land of Canaan. And over the next four centuries, with God's help, that small group would grow into a mighty nation.

All the descendants of Jacob were seventy persons; Joseph was already in Egypt. Then Joseph died, and all his brothers and all that generation. But the people of Israel were fruitful and increased greatly; they multiplied and grew exceedingly strong, so that the land was filled with them. – Exodus 1:5-7 ESV

It was that very same group that Moses led out of the land of Egypt and who now stood at the base of Mount Sinai. There, from their vantage point in the valley, they could see the dense storm cloud hovering over the mountaintop. The peals of thunder and bright flashes of lightning left them awestruck and fearful as God made His powerful presence known. And as Moses and Aaron made their way to the top of the mountain, the people had no way of knowing what was about to happen next.

But their future was about to be radically and unalterably changed. From that lofty spot on the top of the mountain, Moses would receive the law of God, a written compendium of all God's commands that the people of Israel would be required to keep. No longer would Moses have to sit in the seat of judgment and seek the counsel of God. From this point forward, there would be a written code of conduct that determined how the people were to "walk with God."

God's sovereignty was going to trump human autonomy. When it came to how they were to conduct their lives, the descendants of Abraham would have a clear and uncompromising canon of divine regulations to guide them. No one would be free to do what was right in their own eyes. God was going to make His will known and put it in writing. And it should come as no surprise that the first command He gave addressed the ongoing problem of human autonomy and the desire for self-rule.

"You shall have no other gods before me." – Exodus 20:3 ESV

The Israelites were forbidden to worship any God but Yahweh, and that prohibition included self-worship. Unlike Adam and Eve, the Israelites were to refrain from making their own rules or living by their own set of standards. There was no place for autonomy when God was clearly declaring His sovereignty. He alone was God, and He alone could determine the code of conduct that would regulate the lives of His people.

From this moment forward, the people of Israel would be set apart and separated from the rest of the nations on earth by a unique set of laws that would regulate every area of their lives. Nothing was left out. Their entire way of life was going to be regulated by God, for their good and His glory. And it all began with their acknowledgment of His sovereignty and their disavowal of their autonomy.

Set Apart to Stand Out

⁴ “You shall not make for yourself a carved image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. ⁵ You shall not bow down to them or serve them, for I the Lord your God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and the fourth generation of those who hate me, ⁶ but showing steadfast love to thousands of those who love me and keep my commandments.

⁷ “You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain, for the Lord will not hold him guiltless who takes his name in vain.

⁸ “Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. ⁹ Six days you shall labor, and do all your work, ¹⁰ but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God. On it you shall not do any work, you, or your son, or your daughter, your male servant, or your female servant, or your livestock, or the sojourner who is within your gates. ¹¹ For in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested on the seventh day. Therefore the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy. – Exodus 20:4-11 ESV

God’s sovereignty versus man’s autonomy – that is the battle of the ages and it has been going on ever since Adam and Eve ate the forbidden fruit in the Garden of Eden. Their fateful decision was motivated by the desire for self-rule that they believed would give them the freedom to do as they pleased. They had bought into the lies of the enemy, who had convinced them that they could make up their own rules based on their own personal preferences. That is what Satan meant when he claimed, “you will be like God, knowing good and evil” (Genesis 3:5 ESV). He promised them that they would become a law unto themselves, with the power to make their own determination regarding what was right or wrong. And he falsely assured them that the first step to achieving their freedom was to reject the tyranny of God by refusing to abide by His restrictive commands.

But their decision didn’t produce a moral Shangrila, a place where everyone did as they pleased and enjoyed all the supposed perks that self-determination offers. No, the fall produced an atmosphere of moral relativism in which every man did that which was right in his own eyes and all for his own personal benefit.

So, by the time the Israelites left the land of Egypt, they had spent four centuries immersed in a society where moral relativism had been on full display. It’s not that Egypt had been a lawless place where everyone was free to do whatever they wanted. But it was a society that had long ago rejected the God of Noah. The Egyptians were the descendants of Ham, one of the sons of Noah (Psalm 78:51; 105:23). But they did not “walk with God” as Noah had. Instead, they chose a path that, according to the apostle Paul, led to a darkened state, marked by idolatry and wickedness.

But God shows his anger from heaven against all sinful, wicked people who suppress the truth by their wickedness. They know the truth about God because he has made it

obvious to them. For ever since the world was created, people have seen the earth and sky. Through everything God made, they can clearly see his invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature. So they have no excuse for not knowing God.

Yes, they knew God, but they wouldn't worship him as God or even give him thanks. And they began God . As a result, their minds became dark and confused. Claiming to be wise, they instead became utter fools. And instead of worshiping the glorious, ever-living God, they worshiped idols made to look like mere people and birds and animals and reptiles. – Romans 1:18-23 NLT

What an apt and accurate description of the Egyptian culture in which the Israelites had been immersed for nearly 400 years. There was no shortage of gods in the land of Ham, including the Pharaoh who was believed to be a deity in human form. But for the Israelites, things were to be different. God had chosen them as His own. In fact, He had created them out of nothing, having produced a nation from an elderly man from Ur and his barren wife.

From Abram and Sarai, God had produced the nation of Israel. And now, they stood at the base of Mount Sinai, waiting for their God-appointed leader, Moses, to return from his divine appointment on the summit. And little did they know that Moses was going to return with God's law in hand. His time on the mountaintop would mark a watershed moment for the people of God. They were His chosen people, and now they were going to learn how God's chosen people were expected to live their lives. It would begin with the Decalogue, the "ten words" that would encapsulate and summarize all that would follow. God was going to give the people a detailed and lengthy code of conduct that covered virtually every area of human interaction, including their relationship with God and with one another. But the Ten Commandments were intended to provide a memorable and easy-to-follow outline for their behavior as God's set-apart people.

And it began with their acknowledgment of His one-of-a-kind status as God.

"You must not have any other god but me." – Exodus 20:3 NLT

Unlike the Egyptians and every other people group on earth, the Israelites were to worship Yahweh alone. He had created them, redeemed them, and blessed them with the privilege of being His "treasured possession among all peoples" (Exodus 19:5 ESV). As such, they were not to live or behave like any of the other nations. Their conduct was to mirror their unique status as God's chosen people. And those who worshiped the one true God were prohibited from creating substitutes for Him.

"You must not make for yourself an idol of any kind or an image of anything in the heavens or on the earth or in the sea. You must not bow down to them or worship them, for I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God who will not tolerate your affection for any other gods." – Exodus 20:4-5 NLT

God put this non-negotiable restriction in place because He knew His people would be prone to emulate the ways of Egypt, where false gods were so plentiful and prevalent, it was impossible to know how many there really were. For the Israelites, one God was to be more than enough. Their God had defeated all the false gods of Egypt and was worthy of their unwavering devotion and honor.

“You have seen what I did to the Egyptians. You know how I carried you on eagles’ wings and brought you to myself.” – Exodus 19:4 NLT

The first four commandments focus on the Israelites’ relationship with God. They are God-centric and call for a sold-out commitment to Him and Him alone. Their acknowledgment of God as their one and only God is to be accompanied by a proper respect for His name.

“You must not misuse the name of the Lord your God. The Lord will not let you go unpunished if you misuse his name.” – Exodus 20:7 NLT

God’s name is an extension of His character or identity. To misuse His name is tantamount to questioning His very nature. To treat His name(s) in a flippant or disrespectful manner would be no less egregious than denying His holiness. But there is more to this command than merely treating God’s name with respect. From this point forward, the name of God would be associated with the people of Israel. In fact, the name Israel can be translated, as “let God rule.” As a people, they bore the name of God, and it was their privilege and responsibility to bear that name well. Everything they did, they did in the name of God. They were the sons and daughters of Yahweh, and their behavior would reflect either positively or negatively on their Father.

Centuries later, the prophet Ezekiel would record God’s indictment of Israel for having profaned His name among the Gentiles.

“...they profaned my holy name, in that people said of them, ‘These are the people of the Lord, and yet they had to go out of his land.’” – Ezekiel 36:20 ESV

The apostle Paul provides a stunning description of what it meant for the Israelites to misuse God’s name.

You are so proud of knowing the law, but you dishonor God by breaking it. No wonder the Scriptures say, “The Gentiles blaspheme the name of God because of you.” – Romans 2:23-24 NLT

To break God’s law is to dishonor God’s name. To live in disobedience to His commands is to denigrate His holiness through your actions. A child of God who refuses to keep the commands of God brings dishonor to the name of God.

And God provided His people with the Sabbath as a tangible way to display their set-apart status and to prove their commitment to His honor and glory.

“Remember to observe the Sabbath day by keeping it holy. You have six days each week for your ordinary work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath day of rest dedicated to the Lord your God.” – Exodus 20:8-10 NLT

God was to be sovereign over every area of their lives. By dedicating that one day to Him alone, they would be acknowledging His role as their provider and protector. The God who created the heavens and the earth would meet all their needs as long as they remembered to honor Him for who He was and all that He had done for them.

For in six days the Lord made the heavens, the earth, the sea, and everything in them; but on the seventh day he rested. That is why the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and set it apart as holy. – Exodus 20:11 NLT

The Sabbath was not so much a respite from work as it was a reminder of God’s creating and sustaining power. God did not rest on the seventh day because He was weary; he ceased work because His will had been accomplished. He had done all He had planned to do. The creation was complete and perfect. And in a sense, resting on the Sabbath was a way for the people of Israel to recognize the perfection of God’s plan for them. It was a way of honoring His perfect, providential purposes for their lives. They could rest knowing that God had all things under control and operating according to His sovereign plan.

All for the Glory of God

¹² *“Honor your father and your mother, that your days may be long in the land that the Lord your God is giving you.*

¹³ *“You shall not murder.*

¹⁴ *“You shall not commit adultery.*

¹⁵ *“You shall not steal.*

¹⁶ *“You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.*

¹⁷ *“You shall not covet your neighbor’s house; you shall not covet your neighbor’s wife, or his male servant, or his female servant, or his ox, or his donkey, or anything that is your neighbor’s.” – Exodus 20:12-17 ESV*

The book of 2 Chronicles records Solomon’s dedication of the temple in Jerusalem. He had spent years supervising the construction of this magnificent structure that was to serve as the dwelling place of God on earth.

*“I have built you an exalted house, a place for you to dwell in forever.” – 2 Chronicles 6:2
ESV*

But Solomon understood that the God of the universe could not be contained in a structure built by human hands – no matter how glorious and opulent it may be. So, he asked God to honor the temple by answering the prayers of all those who view it as a symbol of His glory and greatness.

“But will God indeed dwell with man on the earth? Behold, heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain you, how much less this house that I have built! Yet have regard to the prayer of your servant and to his plea, O Lord my God, listening to the cry and to the prayer that your servant prays before you, that your eyes may be open day and night toward this house, the place where you have promised to set your name, that you may listen to the prayer that your servant offers toward this place. And listen to the pleas of your servant and of your people Israel, when they pray toward this place. And listen from heaven your dwelling place, and when you hear, forgive.” – 2 Chronicles 6:18-21 ESV

On that auspicious occasion, God gave His visible approval of Solomon’s beautiful creation by filling it with His glory (2 Chronicles 7:1-3). Then He made Solomon a promise.

*“I have heard your prayer and have chosen this place for myself as a house of sacrifice. When I shut up the heavens so that there is no rain, or command the locust to devour the land, or send pestilence among my people, **if my people who are called by my name***

humble themselves, and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and heal their land.” – 2 Chronicles 7:12-14 ESV

God reminded Solomon that the people of Israel bore His name. They were His representatives on earth and, as such, they were to honor Him by the way they lived their lives. But His people had a track record of disobedience and rebellion. They found it difficult to live in keeping with His will and in compliance with His law; a problem that extended all the way back to Mount Sinai. Ever since God gave His law to Moses, the people of Israel had revealed their inability to live up to its exacting standards. And yet, each of the laws found in the Decalogue was intended to help differentiate the people of Israel from the rest of humanity. They alone bore God’s name and their adherence to His law was intended to set them apart as a one-of-a-kind nation that shared a totally unique relationship with Him.

The laws God gave them were not disciplinary or punitive. They were a reflection of His divine character and provided insights into His priorities concerning mankind. They reveal God’s divine perspective on the human condition. That’s why six of the ten commandments are horizontal in their emphasis, dealing with the interactions between God’s people.

In the fifth commandment, God places a high priority on authority, demanding that His people show proper respect and honor to their parents. The family unit was God’s idea and He created it with a hierarchical structure that served as a model of His own role as the Heavenly Father. Just as He gave life to all humanity, the father and mother were the means by which children came into the world. And as God’s co-creators, they were worthy of honor. A child who refuses to live in obedience to his parents will find it difficult to submit to the will of a God he cannot see.

The apostle Paul reiterated this command in his letter to the believers in Ephesus.

Children, obey your parents because you belong to the Lord, for this is the right thing to do. “Honor your father and mother.” This is the first commandment with a promise: If you honor your father and mother, “things will go well for you, and you will have a long life on the earth.” – Ephesians 6:1-3 ESV

It is essential that children learn to live in submission to God-ordained authority if they are going to be contributing members of God’s family. Learning to obey begins at home. Household rules are the foundational platform for teaching obedience to God’s law. A child who refuses to obey and honor his parents will find it impossible to submit to the will of God.

It is interesting to note that the very next commandment prohibits murder – the willful taking of innocent human life. This appears to reflect back on the very first family God created. Adam and Eve produced two sons, Cain and Abel, and it was not long after sin entered the world, that Cain made the fateful decision to murder his brother. Motivated by jealousy and driven by a desire for self-determination, Cain decided to play god and take the life of his brother. In doing

so, he took that which did not belong to him. He robbed Abel of life and stole glory from God, who is the giver of life.

The next command continues the theme of taking that which does not belong to you. In this case, it deals with adultery, the sin of taking another man's wife. With this command, God is displaying His high regard for the institution of marriage and all covenantal relationships. Adultery reveals a blatant disregard for that which God deems binding and unbreakable. Jesus would echo His Father's words when addressing the issue of divorce in His own day.

"Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh? So they are no longer two but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate." – Matthew 19:5-6 ESV

It is not a coincidence that God used the sin of adultery to describe the unfaithfulness of His own people, declaring, "Have you seen what fickle Israel has done? Like a wife who commits adultery, Israel has worshiped other gods on every hill and under every green tree" (Jeremiah 3:6 NLT). Infidelity would become a regular and recurring problem for the Israelites – within their marriage relationships but also in terms of their faithlessness to God.

Again, the eighth commandment carries a prohibition against taking that which does not belong to you. This time the context is stealing the property of others. Theft shows a disregard for the other person's rights and reveals a lack of faith in the providential care of God. To take what belongs to another is to say that God has not provided for your needs. An Israelite who would steal from one of his brothers or sisters was giving evidence of a lack of faith in God. The apostle James describes the real problem behind the act of theft.

You want what you don't have, so you scheme and kill to get it. You are jealous of what others have, but you can't get it, so you fight and wage war to take it away from them. Yet you don't have what you want because you don't ask God for it. And even when you ask, you don't get it because your motives are all wrong—you want only what will give you pleasure. – James 4:2-3 NLT

The ninth commandment prohibits the taking of someone else's reputation. To bear false witness is to spread inaccurate and damaging information about another person designed to question their integrity and destroy their name. It is hateful and harmful. It is to purposefully spread lies about another person with the intent to rob them of honor and esteem in the eyes of others. This was the very sin God accused His people of in the book of Ezekiel.

"I am bringing you back, but not because you deserve it. I am doing it to protect my holy name, on which you brought shame while you were scattered among the nations. I will show how holy my great name is—the name on which you brought shame among the nations." – Ezekiel 36:22-23 NLT

The people of Israel had robbed God of glory by questioning and doubting His integrity and honor. Their behavior demonstrated their lack of trust in His goodness and greatness. Their actions were a form of bearing false witness, making false statements about the faithfulness of God that questioned His power and provision.

The last of the ten commandments deals with the problem of covetousness. At the core of covetousness is a lack of contentment. Covetousness is an obsessive desire to possess what God has not provided. That which we covet is not a legitimate need but a self-determined want that we demand to be fulfilled at all costs. The focus here is less on the external act than the motivation behind it. Covetousness displays a lack of faith in God's provision. Seeing someone who has been blessed with a spouse, a house, an asset, or anything else of value, and demanding that those things be yours, is to question the integrity and goodness of God. It accuses God of favoritism, inequity, and injustice.

Ultimately, all of these commands point back to God. The inter-relational aspect they describe has far more to do with the Israelites' views of God than anything else. The manner in which they treated one another would be a direct reflection of their understanding of God and their relationship with Him. He was calling them to a life of holiness that was intended to illustrate His own set-apart status. They were to be holy as He is holy. They were to reflect His character by valuing what He valued and holding in high esteem those things that were near and dear to His heart.

An Impossible Standard to Keep

¹⁸ Now when all the people saw the thunder and the flashes of lightning and the sound of the trumpet and the mountain smoking, the people were afraid and trembled, and they stood far off ¹⁹ and said to Moses, “You speak to us, and we will listen; but do not let God speak to us, lest we die.” ²⁰ Moses said to the people, “Do not fear, for God has come to test you, that the fear of him may be before you, that you may not sin.” ²¹ The people stood far off, while Moses drew near to the thick darkness where God was.

²² And the Lord said to Moses, “Thus you shall say to the people of Israel: ‘You have seen for yourselves that I have talked with you from heaven. ²³ You shall not make gods of silver to be with me, nor shall you make for yourselves gods of gold. ²⁴ An altar of earth you shall make for me and sacrifice on it your burnt offerings and your peace offerings, your sheep and your oxen. In every place where I cause my name to be remembered I will come to you and bless you. ²⁵ If you make me an altar of stone, you shall not build it of hewn stones, for if you wield your tool on it you profane it. ²⁶ And you shall not go up by steps to my altar, that your nakedness be not exposed on it.’” – Exodus 20:18-26 ESV

These verses serve as a bridge back to the previous chapter, where Moses described the scene at Mount Sinai where the people watched in awe and terror as the glory of God descended upon the mountain, accompanied by smoke, fire, lightning, and thunder.

On the morning of the third day there were thunders and lightnings and a thick cloud on the mountain and a very loud trumpet blast, so that all the people in the camp trembled. Then Moses brought the people out of the camp to meet God, and they took their stand at the foot of the mountain. Now Mount Sinai was wrapped in smoke because the Lord had descended on it in fire. The smoke of it went up like the smoke of a kiln, and the whole mountain trembled greatly. And as the sound of the trumpet grew louder and louder, Moses spoke, and God answered him in thunder. 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. – Exodus 19:16-20 ESV

The people wanted nothing to do with the mountain or its divine visitor. They were so petrified by the sound-and-light show that accompanied God’s presence, that they had no desire to draw near or hear from God directly.

“You speak to us, and we will listen. But don’t let God speak directly to us, or we will die!” – Exodus 20:19 NLT

Moses attempted to assuage their fears by explaining the purpose behind God’s dramatic display of His glory.

“God has come in this way to test you, and so that your fear of him will keep you from sinning!” – Exodus 20:20 NLT

God had intended to strike fear into the hearts of the people. His use of atmospheric signs was meant to convey His greatness and power. Just imagine the scene as the people were bombarded by the sights and sounds of the massive storm taking place above their heads. The entire mountaintop was veiled in dark clouds from which flashes of lightning and booming thunder emanated. And God had told Moses that this would be a manifestation of His divine presence.

“Behold, I am coming to you in a thick cloud, that the people may hear when I speak with you, and may also believe you forever.” – Exodus 19:9 ESV

And God had warned Moses to place a boundary around the base of the mountain to prevent the people from trying to come near.

“...you shall set limits for the people all around, saying, ‘Take care not to go up into the mountain or touch the edge of it.’” – Exodus 19:12 ESV

It seems that the boundaries proved to be unnecessary because the people wanted nothing to do with the mountain and had no desire to get anywhere near this frightening display of God’s glory. Which proves that God’s plan worked. He wanted the people to grasp the greatness of His glory and to fear His holiness. Otherwise, His law would carry no weight. The Decalogue would become just another list of rules to be ignored. But because the giving of His commands was accompanied by a convincing display of His glory, the people couldn’t help but take those commands seriously.

At this point in the narrative, it isn’t clear whether Moses has shared God’s commands with the people. But they knew that something significant had taken place on the mountaintop. This was no ordinary day, and this strange event signaled a change in their relationship with Yahweh. Even His earlier demand that they cleanse themselves before coming near the mountain was a sign that something momentous was about to happen.

“Go down and prepare the people for my arrival. Consecrate them today and tomorrow, and have them wash their clothing. Be sure they are ready on the third day, for on that day the Lord will come down on Mount Sinai as all the people watch.” – Exodus 19:10-11 NLT

This ceremonial cleansing was intended to convey the idea of God’s holiness. It was meant to teach them that they could not come into His presence impurely or in an unworthy state. God’s holiness and righteousness were to be honored at all times. He was a great God who demanded the worship of His people. And now, with the giving of His law, God was providing them with a non-negotiable standard of conduct that would regulate every area of their personal and corporate life as His chosen people. Their lives would be regulated by a set of laws given by the all-powerful Creator God, and obedience to those laws was non-optional.

But what the people of Israel did not understand was that the law was never intended to be a roadmap to righteousness. God knew that His people would find it impossible to live up to His demanding code of conduct. It was always meant to be the gold standard for human behavior that no one could live up to. Centuries later, the apostle Paul would expose the real purpose behind God's law.

Obviously, the law applies to those to whom it was given, for its purpose is to keep people from having excuses, and to show that the entire world is guilty before God. For no one can ever be made right with God by doing what the law commands. The law simply shows us how sinful we are. – Romans 3:19-20 NLT

The storm on Mount Sinai was meant to be a visible manifestation of God's holiness and power. And the Ten Commandments were a written manifestation of the very same thing. But they were designed to show what would be required of God's people so that they might display His glory on earth. As sinful human beings, they were going to have to figure out how to live in obedience to His unwavering and unbending rules so that the world might know what it means to be the people of God.

But God knew that they would fail miserably. No one was able to keep His righteous commands. The law could only expose sinfulness, not convey righteousness. And, once again, the apostle Paul reveals that the law had a purpose that pointed to something greater to come.

Clearly, God's promise to give the whole earth to Abraham and his descendants was based not on his obedience to God's law, but on a right relationship with God that comes by faith. If God's promise is only for those who obey the law, then faith is not necessary and the promise is pointless. For the law always brings punishment on those who try to obey it. (The only way to avoid breaking the law is to have no law to break!) – Romans 4:13-15 NLT

What the people of Israel needed to understand was that their God was holy, majestic, righteous, and demanding. He could not and would not tolerate anything less than perfection among His chosen people because they bore His name and served as His representatives on earth. But He was fully aware of their shortcomings. That is why He would eventually provide them with the sacrificial system as a way of providing atonement for their failure to keep His law. It was inevitable that they would sin, so He provided a means by which they could receive forgiveness and restoration. And God alludes to this future sacrificial system by providing His people with instructions for building what He deemed as an acceptable altar of sacrifice.

“Build for me an altar made of earth, and offer your sacrifices to me—your burnt offerings and peace offerings, your sheep and goats, and your cattle. Build my altar wherever I cause my name to be remembered, and I will come to you and bless you.” – Exodus 20:24 NLT

God reiterated His commands concerning idolatry and spiritual adultery. The people were to have no other gods but Yahweh. And they were to worship Yahweh on His terms. They were prohibited from following the ways of the pagans and emulating their unacceptable worship practices. These rather strange-sounding instructions were meant to eliminate any and all of the pagan worship modes that the Israelites might try to copy.

God was very specific. He cared about His people's behavior. He had strong opinions about their worship and the way they constructed their altars. He was a righteous God who demanded that His people worship Him in the right way. There was to be no impurity associated with their worship of Him. He would not tolerate indecency or impropriety.

His instructions regarding the altar provide a clear indication that sin was expected. The two kinds of sacrifices God mentions are tied directly to sin. The burnt offering was a sacrifice of atonement that paid for sin. The peace offering was meant to remind His people of the benefits of atonement for sin: a restored relationship with Him. Sin brought judgment. But atonement brought peace. That would be the ongoing relationship between God and His people, and it pointed to the ultimate sacrifice of Jesus Christ, the Lamb of God. His atoning work on the cross paid for the sins of mankind, once and for all, and provided permanent peace with God for all those who placed their faith in Him.

But now, once for all time, he has appeared at the end of the age to remove sin by his own death as a sacrifice.

And just as each person is destined to die once and after that comes judgment, so also Christ was offered once for all time as a sacrifice to take away the sins of many people. He will come again, not to deal with our sins, but to bring salvation to all who are eagerly waiting for him. – Hebrews 9:26-28 NLT

Practical Laws for Real Life

¹ “Now these are the rules that you shall set before them. ² When you buy a Hebrew slave, he shall serve six years, and in the seventh he shall go out free, for nothing. ³ If he comes in single, he shall go out single; if he comes in married, then his wife shall go out with him. ⁴ If his master gives him a wife and she bears him sons or daughters, the wife and her children shall be her master’s, and he shall go out alone. ⁵ But if the slave plainly says, ‘I love my master, my wife, and my children; I will not go out free,’ ⁶ then his master shall bring him to God, and he shall bring him to the door or the doorpost. And his master shall bore his ear through with an awl, and he shall be his slave forever.” – Exodus 21:1-6 ESV

Beginning with chapter 21 and running through the 19th verse of chapter 23, Moses delivers the expanded version of God’s law to His people. He later refers to it as “the Book of the Covenant” (Exodus 24:7 ESV). This more comprehensive collection of commands was intended to be an extension of the Decalogue. It is “an application of the Decalogue to the specific social context of Israel as a nation” (John D. Currid, *A Study Commentary on Exodus*).

The Decalogue and the Book of the Covenant were not given in a complete moral or legal vacuum. By the time of the exodus, various ancient societies had developed legal codes to help regulate human behavior and interaction. Many of these codes contain prohibitions similar to those found in the Book of the Covenant. These include the Laws of Eshnunna, created by the Akkadian civilization located in Mesopotamia. The Sumerian civilization had the Code of Lipit-Ishtar. And centuries later, the Babylonians would come up with the more familiar Code of Hammurabi.

It is important to note that the Israelites had not been living in a lawless state. Even in Egypt, their lives had been governed by a series of written and oral legal codes. God created humanity with a basic understanding of His righteous standards. The apostle Paul wrote about how God has placed within all men an instinctive understanding of His law.

Even Gentiles, who do not have God’s written law, show that they know his law when they instinctively obey it, even without having heard it. They demonstrate that God’s law is written in their hearts, for their own conscience and thoughts either accuse them or tell them they are doing right. – Romans 2:13-15 NLT

When Adam and Eve sinned in the garden, they violated a clear command of God.

“You may surely eat of every tree of the garden, but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die.” – Genesis 2:16-17 ESV

And their motivation for breaking that command was their desire to “be like God, knowing good and evil” (Genesis 3:5 ESV). As soon as they chose to disobey God’s prohibition, “the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked” (Genesis 3:7 ESV). They gained an

immediate awareness of their sinful state. In that moment, their innocence was replaced with guilt, as they considered the ramifications of their actions.

From the very beginning, God's moral law permeated His creation. And despite the sin of Adam and Eve, mankind maintained a rudimentary understanding of God's will concerning human behavior. Cain knew murder was wrong, and he understood that there were painful consequences for those who took the life of the innocent.

Cain said to the Lord, "My punishment is greater than I can bear." – Exodus 4:13 ESV

But all the legal codes in the world could not correct mankind's moral spiral into disobedience and decadence. By the time we get to chapter six of Genesis, the moral state of human society had hit an all-time low.

The Lord observed the extent of human wickedness on the earth, and he saw that everything they thought or imagined was consistently and totally evil. – Genesis 6:5 NLT

Their problem was not a lack of laws, but a general unwillingness and inability to obey those laws. Things had deteriorated so badly, that the text indicates there was only one righteous man left on the earth.

Noah was a righteous man, the only blameless person living on earth at the time, and he walked in close fellowship with God. – Genesis 6:9 NLT

This led God to begin again, providing Noah and his extended family with a means of escaping His judgment against the rest of human society. And post-flood, God's unwritten law continued to hold sway, dictating the behavior of all those who descended from Noah's three sons. But the generations that followed proved to be no different than their pre-flood ancestors. They also willingly and regularly violated God's righteous standards.

This led God to begin again with a man named Abram, an elderly pagan from the land of Ur in Mesopotamia. God chose this obscure individual to carry out His divine plan for restoring sinful mankind to a right relationship with Himself. And long before Abram and his barren wife, Sarai, had ever conceived their first child, God made a covenant with them. This legal agreement was intended to set apart Abram and his descendants as a special people, who would enjoy a one-of-a-kind relationship with God Almighty.

"As for you, you shall keep my covenant, you and your offspring after you throughout their generations. This is my covenant, which you shall keep, between me and you and your offspring after you: Every male among you shall be circumcised. You shall be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskins, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and you." – Genesis 17:9-11 ESV

Circumcision was a sign of the covenant. It was a legal requirement mandated by God that was intended to signify their unwavering commitment to their newfound status as His chosen people. God had promised to produce from Abram and his barren wife a great and mighty nation. And that promise was passed down from Abram to his son, Isaac, and then from Isaac to Jacob. And the Israelites whom God redeemed out of captivity in Egypt were the direct descendants of Jacob. They were the great nation that God had promised, and they were to be His treasured possession, a kingdom of priests, and a holy nation (Exodus 19:5-6).

But after 400 years of living in Egypt, separated from God and influenced by the idolatry and immorality of that land, the people of Israel needed a more concrete and comprehensive understanding of God's expectations of them. So, He gave them His law. The Ten Commandments were the summary statement of His moral requirements. The Book of the Covenant provided the application of those "ten words" to everyday life situations. These practical and highly specific laws were given to the people of Israel. They were intended to govern their conduct and set them apart from every other people group on the earth. These laws were not to be universally applied or mandated for all cultures but were designed to differentiate the people of God from everyone else.

In a sense, the Ten Commandments are timeless and universal in their application. But the Book of the Covenant was meant to apply to a specific people group living at a particular time in human history.

"...the Book of the Covenant was never intended to address every possible situation. It was more a guide to cases than a statutory code. Whereas the Ten Commandments were expressed as universal absolutes, the laws in the Book of the Covenant dealt with specific situations. They provided a series of legal precedents that wise elders could use in settling disputes. While these case laws could not possibly cover every new situation that might arise, they illustrated basic legal principles for living in community with the people of God." – Philip Graham Ryken, *Exodus: Saved for God's Glory*

But why does God begin his Book of the Covenant with laws concerning slavery? The answer is found in the prologue that God gave before delivering the Decalogue to Moses.

And God spoke all these words, saying,

"I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery." – Exodus 20:1-2 ESV

The Israelites had just been delivered from slavery in Egypt. They had spent several centuries under the heavy hand of the Pharaohs, toiling as indentured servants and enduring unrelenting persecution, and suffering at the hands of their masters. But now, they were free. And God wanted them to use their newfound freedom as an incentive to treat others with greater dignity and respect.

It can't be overlooked that, in His giving of the law, God does not abolish the practice of slavery. Instead, He provides moral guidelines for the treatment of those who find themselves enslaved. In a world where slavery was ubiquitous and universal, God provided a new way of regulating this institution that was of human origin. Slavery, like adultery, murder, incest, lying, and idolatry, was never God's intention. They are all the result of sin's entrance into the world. And slavery, as an institution and practice, became a symbol of mankind's relationship with sin.

Jesus understood this undeniable link between mankind and sin. He described its vice-like grip on humanity in a statement He made to the Pharisees.

"Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who practices sin is a slave to sin." – John 8:34 ESV

The apostle Paul would later declare the remarkable significance of Jesus' death on the cross, which provided the only means of being delivered from slavery to sin.

We know that our old self was crucified with him in order that the body of sin might be brought to nothing, so that we would no longer be enslaved to sin. For one who has died has been set free from sin. – Romans 6:6-7 ESV

God had delivered Israel from their slavery in Egypt. And when they exited that land, they brought with them a "mixed multitude" (Exodus 12:38) that most likely included their own personal slaves. In fact, when God instituted the Passover, He gave strict instructions concerning those slaves.

"...every slave that is bought for money may eat of it after you have circumcised him." – Exodus 12:44 ESV

God knew that slavery was going to be a permanent part of human society, in one form or another. And it would provide a glaring and ongoing illustration of mankind's hopeless relationship with sin. Just as there were those who were born into slavery, every human being is born into a state of sin. And just as there were those who sold themselves into slavery to satisfy a debt, there are those who willfully choose a life of sin in the hopes of finding relief from their guilt and shame.

From our current cultural vantage point, it is difficult for us to comprehend these verses. We struggle with the idea of God somehow condoning a practice our society knows to be abhorrent and has worked hard to abolish. But these passages are dealing with a subject that was woven into the social fabric of the times. Indentured servitude was a way of life. Every nation practiced it. And God wanted His people to exhibit a completely different approach to this painful and pervasive part of the human condition. So, He provided His chosen people with binding laws that were to govern their interactions with everyone in their community, including slaves.

A Different Kind of Freedom

⁷ “When a man sells his daughter as a slave, she shall not go out as the male slaves do. ⁸ If she does not please her master, who has designated her for himself, then he shall let her be redeemed. He shall have no right to sell her to a foreign people, since he has broken faith with her. ⁹ If he designates her for his son, he shall deal with her as with a daughter. ¹⁰ If he takes another wife to himself, he shall not diminish her food, her clothing, or her marital rights. ¹¹ And if he does not do these three things for her, she shall go out for nothing, without payment of money. – Exodus 21:7-11 ESV

As the Israelites stood at the base of Mount Sinai in the middle of the wilderness, they were in a kind of no man’s land between Egypt and Canaan. They were no longer living as the slaves of the descendants of Ham, but they were also far from their future homeland. Their exit from Egypt had been relatively easy but their first few months of travel to the land of promise had been marked by difficulties. They had encountered shortages of water and food, which God miraculously remedied. The days had been long, and they had begun to grow weary of the monotonous and unpleasant nature of their journey. But God was preparing them for what lie ahead. He was teaching them to trust Him and to understand that He would provide for all their needs. The conquest of Canaan was not going to be a cakewalk.

The land God promised to Abraham as the homeland for his descendants was heavily occupied and the current residents would not give up their property willingly or easily. Their removal from the land was going to be a non-negotiable requirement for the Israelites because God knew that their pagan practices would have a negative influence on His chosen people. And Moses would later give the people an explanation for God’s extermination policy regarding the land of Canaan.

“When the Lord your God brings you into the land that you are entering to take possession of it, and clears away many nations before you, the Hittites, the Girgashites, the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites, seven nations more numerous and mightier than you, and when the Lord your God gives them over to you, and you defeat them, then you must devote them to complete destruction. You shall make no covenant with them and show no mercy to them. You shall not intermarry with them, giving your daughters to their sons or taking their daughters for your sons, for they would turn away your sons from following me, to serve other gods.” – Deuteronomy 7:1-4 ESV

And Moses went on to remind the Israelites of their unique status as God’s chosen people.

“For you are a people holy to the Lord your God. The Lord your God has chosen you to be a people for his treasured possession, out of all the peoples who are on the face of the earth.” – Deuteronomy 7:6 ESV

The giving of the Decalogue and the Book of the Covenant was intended to provide the Israelites with clear guidelines to govern their behavior. God had Canaan in mind when He gave them His legal code of conduct and many of these laws have direct application to the circumstances they will encounter when they enter the land. The greatest temptation they will face will be that of compromise and cultural assimilation. Rather than stand out as God's treasured possession and live like a holy nation and a royal priesthood, they will be tempted to blend in with the pagan cultures around, adopting their ways and acclimating to their laws and lifestyles.

That is why many of the laws found in Exodus 21-23 sound so foreign to those of us living in the more "enlightened" 21st century. We struggle with God's commands concerning slavery. We reel at the idea of God condoning a father selling his daughter or son for profit. In these opening verses of chapter 21, people seem to be treated like property rather than those made in the image of God.

The world in which the Israelites lived was far different from the one we occupy. In a way, they lived in a day and age that was similar to the American wild west. Canaan was a place filled with a diverse group of nations that practiced a variety of different religions and lived according to their own set of moral codes. There was no shared "law of the land" and no "sheriff" to help enforce it. Everyone did what was right in their own eyes. People *were* treated like property. Women had no rights or value, except for their child-bearing abilities.

When the Israelites finally entered the land of Canaan, they would find themselves surrounded by people who lived according to their own set of rules. So, long before the people of God arrived at their final destination, God gave them His criteria for navigating life in a fallen and broken world. And the fact that He started with the difficult topic of slavery was intentional. His people knew what it was like to be enslaved. Four generations of Israelites had experienced the devastating reality of this degrading and demoralizing institution. Of all people, they should have had a strong aversion to participating in such a reprehensible practice. But in their world, indentured servanthood was almost unavoidable. In an age when social welfare programs were non-existent, many who found themselves in debt had no other recourse but to use their bodies as collateral, entering into indentured servanthood to escape poverty or possible death.

The Israelites had lived through this sad reality during their days in Egypt. When the seven-year famine that ravaged the land reached its peak, the Egyptians became desperate for food. Having used all their money to purchase grain from the Egyptian government, they were forced to sell their property and possessions. When those things ran out, they were left with nothing else to offer but themselves.

...when that year was ended, they came to him the following year and said to him, "We will not hide from my lord that our money is all spent. The herds of livestock are my lord's. There is nothing left in the sight of my lord but our bodies and our land. Why should we die before your eyes, both we and our land? Buy us and our land for food, and

we with our land will be servants to Pharaoh. And give us seed that we may live and not die, and that the land may not be desolate.” – Genesis 47:18-19 ESV

As difficult as it is for us to believe or accept, this was the welfare system Joseph implemented that kept the people of Egypt alive. And rather than seeing Joseph’s actions as punitive or abusive, they expressed their gratefulness.

“You have saved our lives; may it please my lord, we will be servants to Pharaoh.” – Genesis 47:25 ESV

Yet, as we consider these first few laws, it’s difficult to understand how they could be the work of a holy, righteous, and just God. How could God condone a man selling his daughter as a slave? Why would God make provisions for one man to purchase another man and force him to act as his servant for six years? Our modern sensibilities make it almost impossible to grasp the significance of what was taking place in those days.

“In Israel servitude was voluntary (at least for Israelites). People hired themselves into the service of others. Usually this was because they were poor, and they recognized that the best way to meet their needs while at the same time paying off their debts was to become someone’s servant. *Servant* is the proper word for it. They were not *slaves*, as we usually think of the term, but something more like apprentices, hired hands, or indentured laborers. They lived in their master’s home, where they worked hard in exchange for room, board, and an honest wage.” – Philip Graham Ryken, *Exodus: Saved For God’s Glory*

When reading these chapters, it’s essential that we factor in the cultural conditions of the time period in which God’s laws were given. The Israelites were living in a day that was very dissimilar to the one in which we live. Cultural mores were distinctively different than those with which we are familiar. And God was giving His people laws that would make sense within their immediate context.

It is difficult for us to imagine any slave making the statement: “I love my master, my wife, and my children; I will not go out free” (Exodus 21:5 ESV). But the emphasis of the passage seems to be on the importance of the family unit. Even an Israelite in Moses’ day might have second-guessed the decision to exchange freedom for maintaining family unity. But God wants them to know that freedom is not the end-all. Within God’s economy, there are certain things that are of greater value than freedom itself. For God’s people, love for Him and love for others are to trump everything else. Even a slave can love his family well. But a man who sacrifices his family to achieve personal freedom has given up that which God has deemed of greater value.

God knew that the people of Israel were going to view their status as His treasured possession as some kind of exemption from pain and suffering. They were expecting to enjoy all the perks that come with being the chosen people of God Almighty. But centuries later, the apostle Paul would remind his readers that there are some things more important than status and significance.

Yes, each of you should remain as you were when God called you. Are you a slave? Don't let that worry you—but if you get a chance to be free, take it. And remember, if you were a slave when the Lord called you, you are now free in the Lord. And if you were free when the Lord called you, you are now a slave of Christ. – 1 Corinthians 7:20-22 NLT

These laws were meant to regulate relationships, including those between men and those between men and God. That is why, when Jesus was asked to name the greatest commandment, He replied:

“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets.” – Matthew 22:37-40 ESV

The Law and Love

¹² “Whoever strikes a man so that he dies shall be put to death. ¹³ But if he did not lie in wait for him, but God let him fall into his hand, then I will appoint for you a place to which he may flee.

¹⁴ But if a man willfully attacks another to kill him by cunning, you shall take him from my altar, that he may die.

¹⁵ “Whoever strikes his father or his mother shall be put to death.

¹⁶ “Whoever steals a man and sells him, and anyone found in possession of him, shall be put to death.

¹⁷ “Whoever curses his father or his mother shall be put to death.

¹⁸ “When men quarrel and one strikes the other with a stone or with his fist and the man does not die but takes to his bed, ¹⁹ then if the man rises again and walks outdoors with his staff, he who struck him shall be clear; only he shall pay for the loss of his time, and shall have him thoroughly healed.

²⁰ “When a man strikes his slave, male or female, with a rod and the slave dies under his hand, he shall be avenged. ²¹ But if the slave survives a day or two, he is not to be avenged, for the slave is his money.

²² “When men strive together and hit a pregnant woman, so that her children come out, but there is no harm, the one who hit her shall surely be fined, as the woman’s husband shall impose on him, and he shall pay as the judges determine. ²³ But if there is harm, then you shall pay life for life, ²⁴ eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, ²⁵ burn for burn, wound for wound, stripe for stripe.

²⁶ “When a man strikes the eye of his slave, male or female, and destroys it, he shall let the slave go free because of his eye. ²⁷ If he knocks out the tooth of his slave, male or female, he shall let the slave go free because of his tooth.

²⁸ “When an ox gores a man or a woman to death, the ox shall be stoned, and its flesh shall not be eaten, but the owner of the ox shall not be liable. ²⁹ But if the ox has been accustomed to gore in the past, and its owner has been warned but has not kept it in, and it kills a man or a woman, the ox shall be stoned, and its owner also shall be put to death. ³⁰ If a ransom is imposed on him, then he shall give for the redemption of his life whatever is imposed on him. ³¹ If it gores a man’s son or daughter, he shall be dealt with according to this same rule. ³² If the ox gores a slave, male or female, the owner shall give to their master thirty shekels of silver, and the ox shall be stoned. – Exodus 21:12-32 ESV

Love God. Love one another. Jesus said that these were the two greatest commandments, and He declared that they encapsulate all that is contained in the law and the writings of the

prophets (Matthew 22:40). When God told the Israelites, “You shall have no other gods before me” (Exodus 20:3 ESV), He was expecting more from them than just blind allegiance. He desired their willful devotion and unadulterated love. If they truly loved Him they would never consider worshiping another god in place of Him. Their fealty to God was to be an outward expression of their love for Him.

God describes His people as “those who love me and keep my commandments” (Exodus 20:6 ESV). In other words, their obedience to His law was to be a manifestation of their love for Him. It was to be a delight rather than a duty. Honoring His name through their actions demonstrated their love for Him. Keeping His Sabbath holy was an outward sign of their inward devotion to Him. Refusing to bow down to false gods was evidence of their unwavering fidelity to Him alone.

And their love for God was to be accompanied by a love for one another. Six of the ten commandments had to do with tangible examples of how that love for others was to show up in everyday life. And in the Book of the Covenant, the expanded addendum to the Decalogue, God gave further commands regarding the interpersonal relationships between His chosen people. These laws were intended to deal with the everyday issues of life in a community. But, ultimately, they were intended to provide practical guidance for how to love others well, even while living in a sin-darkened world.

In his first epistle, the apostle John describes in great detail the kind of love God expects of His people. He begins by describing God as light.

God is light, and in him is no darkness at all. If we say we have fellowship with him while we walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth. – 1 John 1:5-6 ESV

According to John, fellowship with God should produce fellowship with others.

...if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another. – 1 John 1:7 ESV

It is our love for God that makes possible our love for others. To truly love others is countercultural and runs contrary to our basic sin nature. And John warns, “If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us” (1 John 8 ESV).

The law was given so that the Israelites might understand their sinfulness. The commandments found in the Book of the Covenant deal with sin-fueled behavior in a community context: people abusing, misusing, dishonoring, defrauding, and even murdering one another. They contain unflattering examples of unloving actions perpetrated by those who claim to have a relationship with God. But John writes:

Whoever says "I know him" but does not keep his commandments is a liar, and the truth is not in him, but whoever keeps his word, in him truly the love of God is perfected. – 1 John 2:4-5 ESV

Obedying God's commands was a means of proving one's love for Him. And His love is perfected or fully accomplished through the one who loves others well. Ultimately, it is not our obedience that proves our love for God; it is our love for others. John amplifies this idea in the fourth chapter of his letter.

We love because he first loved us. If anyone says, "I love God," and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen. And this commandment we have from him: whoever loves God must also love his brother. – 1 John 4:19-21 ESV

The laws found in the Book of Covenant are essentially God's non-negotiable requirements for expressing love in a cultural context. They were meant to show the Israelites how God's love was to guide the lives of His people. Moses would later remind the people that their status as God's treasured possession had been unearned and undeserved.

"For you are a people holy to the Lord your God. The Lord your God has chosen you to be a people for his treasured possession, out of all the peoples who are on the face of the earth. It was not because you were more in number than any other people that the Lord set his love on you and chose you, for you were the fewest of all peoples, but it is because the Lord loves you and is keeping the oath that he swore to your fathers, that the Lord has brought you out with a mighty hand and redeemed you from the house of slavery, from the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt." – Deuteronomy 7:6-8 ESV

God had chosen them based on His love for them – even when they were unlovable. And it was that gracious, merciful love that should motivate their love for one another, as expressed in their obedience to His commandments.

Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God, and whoever loves has been born of God and knows God. Anyone who does not love does not know God, because God is love. – 1 John 4:7-8 ESV

Each of these laws is undergirded by a love for God. That is why Moses told the Israelites, "Know therefore that the Lord your God is God, the faithful God who keeps covenant and steadfast love with **those who love him and keep his commandments**, to a thousand generations..." (Deuteronomy 7:9 ESV). Again, the keeping of the commands was not the real point. But in keeping the commands, they would be expressing their love and devotion for God as they funneled that love to one another through tangible actions. And Jesus would later express the same idea to His disciples:

“If anyone loves me, he will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him. Whoever does not love me does not keep my words.” – John 14:23-24 ESV

This section of the Book of the Covenant contains laws that deal with different kinds of crimes, including capital crimes, personal injuries, and criminal negligence. They range from cases of homicide to physical and verbal abuse. These verses go into a great deal of detail but also provide general principles concerning human interaction in a fallen world. These things were inevitable, even among the chosen people of God. They were not immune from the temptation to sin against one another. So, when they did sin, God wanted them to know how to deal with the aftermath of their unloving and selfish decisions. Nothing was left to the imagination.

To take another person’s life was an expression of hate rather than love. To strike another person, causing them bodily injury, was an act of violence and evidence of a lack of love. Throughout these verses, God uses words like striking, quarreling, cursing, stealing, and striving. They describe behavior that is antithetical to love and in contradiction to the very nature of God. God is love (1 John 4:8). It is not a byproduct of His nature, but it is the very essence of who He is. And that love is to be manifested in the lives of His people. But when they fail to do so, there must be consequences. When hate shows up, justice must be meted out. When a lack of love results in harm, restitution must be made.

God knew His people were going to struggle with keeping His law. He also knew that they could find it difficult to love well. That’s why He provided laws designed to regulate loveless behavior among His people. Their failure to love was inevitable. But more hatred and vengeance would not be the answer. Even in dealing with the lack of love among themselves, the people were to respond with love, not hate. Justice must be served, but not at the expense of love. Sin must be properly dealt with, but always in a loving and God-honoring manner.

...this commandment we have from him: whoever loves God must also love his brother. – 1 John 4:21 ESV

Take Ownership

³³ *“When a man opens a pit, or when a man digs a pit and does not cover it, and an ox or a donkey falls into it, ³⁴ the owner of the pit shall make restoration. He shall give money to its owner, and the dead beast shall be his.*

³⁵ *“When one man’s ox butts another’s, so that it dies, then they shall sell the live ox and share its price, and the dead beast also they shall share. ³⁶ Or if it is known that the ox has been accustomed to gore in the past, and its owner has not kept it in, he shall repay ox for ox, and the dead beast shall be his.*

¹ *“If a man steals an ox or a sheep, and kills it or sells it, he shall repay five oxen for an ox, and four sheep for a sheep.” – Exodus 21:33-22:1 ESV*

In these verses, the focus of the commandments shifts to the topic of restitution but particularly in cases involving domesticated animals. In an agrarian culture, animals were a daily part of life. They were a source of food and labor but were also prone to unpredictable behavior. Tens of thousands of goats, sheep, and oxen accompanied the Israelite community as they made their way from Egypt to Canaan and, as personal property, the responsibility for these animals fell to their rightful owners. While domesticated, these creatures could still cause property damage or personal injuries.

God has already dealt with the rare case of an ox goring someone to death. At first glance, this seems like such an unlikely scenario, but it provides a principle regarding the need for personal responsibility. The owner of the ox must take ownership of its actions. In this case, the ox is to be stoned to death. This supports the overall legal principle known as *lex talionis*.

“...if there is further injury, the punishment must match the injury: a life for a life, an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth, a hand for a hand, a foot for a foot, a burn for a burn, a wound for a wound, a bruise for a bruise.” – Exodus 21:23-25 NLT

In Latin, *lex talionis* means “law of retaliation.” Essentially, it was a law designed to regulate retaliation. Its primary goal was to ensure that the punishment fit the crime and to prevent an unbalanced response in the form of revenge. People were not to take matters into their own hands and mete out a disproportionate degree of justice. God’s law demanded that all penalties for crimes committed be equitable rather than excessive.

God even provided details concerning an ox that was a repeat offender. If an ox was prone to violent behavior, it was the responsibility of the owner to protect his neighbors from any harm. If he failed to do so and the ox ended up killing again, both the ox and the owner would be condemned to death. But God provided a way for the owner to escape death by redeeming himself through the payment of a ransom.

“However, the dead person’s relatives may accept payment to compensate for the loss of life. The owner of the ox may redeem his life by paying whatever is demanded.” – Exodus 21:30 NLT

To our modern sensibilities, these cases seem strange and unnecessary. But to the Israelites, these kinds of scenarios were a regular part of daily life. These laws made sense and provided much-needed guidelines for how to deal with the inevitable conflicts that accompanied life in a fallen world.

God wanted His people to take personal responsibility for their actions. Their behavior was important and there was no excuse for negligence. Sins of commission and omission were equally wrong and had to be dealt with properly. If a man dug a pit and someone else’s ox or donkey fell into it, he was responsible for the outcome.

“The owner of the pit must pay full compensation to the owner of the animal, but then he gets to keep the dead animal.” – Exodus 21:34 NLT

He couldn’t just write it off as bad luck. He was not free to excuse his liability by saying, “Accidents will happen.” Justice must be served. Compensation must be made. Legal liability is a biblical principle that is intended to regulate human behavior. In a world where everyone wants to dismiss their culpability and avoid any and all liability for their actions, God inserted a non-negotiable principle of personal responsibility. We are to own our actions. If the tree I planted falls on my neighbor’s house, I am to take responsibility for it and make restitution. If my dog bites a child, I am not free to excuse its actions by saying, “Dogs will be dogs.” God expects me to do the right thing.

All of these laws are intended to help God’s people reflect God’s character. He is a God of justice, mercy, and grace. He always does what is right and good, and He expects His covenant people to mirror His ways. But because sin has infected our world and heavily influenced our hearts, He has given us His law to show us how to do the good and right thing. Left to our own devices, we would naturally deflect blame and deny responsibility, but God will not allow us to do so.

In a sense, God is stating that personal property is an extension of the individual. An ox that kills is the responsibility of its owner. A man who steals a sheep or goat is actually committing a crime against the animal’s owner. He is dishonoring and devaluing that individual by his actions, and God expects him to make restitution.

“...the thief must pay back five oxen for each ox stolen, and four sheep for each sheep stolen.” – Exodus 22:1 NLT

No excuses accepted. No justification allowed. Each individual was expected to make things right; to do the right thing. God was attempting to create a community where justice prevailed and love permeated every interaction. God expected His people to live holy, set-apart lives that

were distinctively different than their neighbors. They were to be a light to the world, living together in an atmosphere of unity and mutual accountability. As the psalmist said, “How wonderful and pleasant it is when brothers live together in harmony!” (Psalm 133:1 NLT).

And that was God’s desire for His people.

Integrity and Personal Responsibility

² *If a thief is found breaking in and is struck so that he dies, there shall be no bloodguilt for him, ³ but if the sun has risen on him, there shall be bloodguilt for him. He shall surely pay. If he has nothing, then he shall be sold for his theft. ⁴ If the stolen beast is found alive in his possession, whether it is an ox or a donkey or a sheep, he shall pay double.*

⁵ *“If a man causes a field or vineyard to be grazed over, or lets his beast loose and it feeds in another man’s field, he shall make restitution from the best in his own field and in his own vineyard.*

⁶ *“If fire breaks out and catches in thorns so that the stacked grain or the standing grain or the field is consumed, he who started the fire shall make full restitution.*

⁷ *“If a man gives to his neighbor money or goods to keep safe, and it is stolen from the man’s house, then, if the thief is found, he shall pay double. ⁸ If the thief is not found, the owner of the house shall come near to God to show whether or not he has put his hand to his neighbor’s property. ⁹ For every breach of trust, whether it is for an ox, for a donkey, for a sheep, for a cloak, or for any kind of lost thing, of which one says, ‘This is it,’ the case of both parties shall come before God. The one whom God condemns shall pay double to his neighbor.*

¹⁰ *“If a man gives to his neighbor a donkey or an ox or a sheep or any beast to keep safe, and it dies or is injured or is driven away, without anyone seeing it, ¹¹ an oath by the Lord shall be between them both to see whether or not he has put his hand to his neighbor’s property. The owner shall accept the oath, and he shall not make restitution. ¹² But if it is stolen from him, he shall make restitution to its owner. ¹³ If it is torn by beasts, let him bring it as evidence. He shall not make restitution for what has been torn.*

¹⁴ *“If a man borrows anything of his neighbor, and it is injured or dies, the owner not being with it, he shall make full restitution. ¹⁵ If the owner was with it, he shall not make restitution; if it was hired, it came for its hiring fee.” – Exodus 22:2-15 ESV*

These laws could be summed up with the simple adage: Honesty is the best policy. When it comes to human relationships, God puts a high priority on integrity and morality. He expects His people to do the right thing and, when they don’t, He demands that they make amends. God created human beings to live in a communal environment that requires close interaction and a sense of interdependency. The behavior of one affects all. So, when crafting the code of conduct that would regulate life within His covenant community, God included laws that would encourage honesty and mutual accountability. In His covenant community, no man was to be an island. Everyone’s individual behavior had corporate implications.

In giving the Decalogue, God covered the moral law concerning theft.

“You shall not steal.” – Exodus 20:15 ESV

This eighth commandment prohibited theft. Even within the communal context of the nation of Israel, people were allowed to own private property. It was not a collective, where everyone shared all things in common. Instead, individuals could own their own homes, possess flocks and herds, and enjoy the benefits and rights of ownership. But God knew this arrangement, in conjunction with the effects of the fall, would result in inequities that produced covetousness and jealousy. The have-nots would become envious of the haves and be tempted to resort to theft to balance the playing field.

So, these commands are examples of the moral law (Don't steal) applied as civil law. What were the people of Israel to do when someone was caught in the act of stealing? How were they supposed to respond when an individual damaged property belonging to someone else? The prohibition against stealing had to be nuanced and parsed out so that it made sense in a variety of different scenarios because human beings have an uncanny ability to justify their actions – even the bad ones.

The first case involves someone who breaks into a house with the intent to steal. But if the homeowner catches the intruder in the act and kills him, it is to be considered an act of self-defense. He will be considered innocent of murder. But the outcome is quite different if the homeowner kills the thief in broad daylight. In that case, the claim of self-defense is waived and replaced with a conviction of murder. There is no explanation given for this variance in outcomes, but it would appear that the difference has to do with the threat of bodily harm. A homeowner who catches someone breaking and entering in the middle of the night has no way of knowing the intentions of the intruder. Fearing the threat of personal harm, the homeowner has the right to defend himself, his family, and his property. But with the rising of the sun, a different light is shed on the very same scenario. It becomes easier to discern the perpetrator's intentions. Theft does not justify murder. The threat of stolen property does not give the homeowner the right to take another man's life.

Another way of interpreting this law is that if a man is killed in the act of breaking and entering, he will not be found guilty of theft. And there will be no restitution required because he has paid with his life. But if the thief accomplishes his mission and lives to see the next day, he will be held accountable. He will be required to pay for his crime. If he is unable to make restitution, he is to be sold and the proceeds used to reimburse his victim. If he is caught with the stolen property in hand, he will be required to compensate the aggrieved party at double its value.

Verses 5 and 6 deal with cases of criminal negligence. These two scenarios cover inadvertent and unintentional damage done to someone else's property. In the first case, an individual is guilty of allowing his flocks or herds to damage another individual's property. They have overgrazed the land of a neighbor. Since there were no fences in those days, it was easy for these kinds of accidents to happen. But this did not excuse one man from respecting the rights of another. If damage was done, the guilty party was expected to make restitution.

If a man started a fire to clear his own land, but it spread to a neighbor's field, destroying his harvested and stacked grain, he was to be held accountable.

“...he who started the fire shall make full restitution.” – Exodus 22:6 ESV

An apology would not suffice. An admission of guilt was to be accompanied by an exchange of compensation. Harm was done and payment must be made.

The commands that follow have to do with cases of personal liability and responsibility. In a day when banks were non-existent, people were forced to depend upon others for the safekeeping of their valuables. So, if a man placed his personal property in the care of a friend and those goods were stolen, what was the proper protocol to follow? Who was responsible? There was no FDIC to cover the loss. So, what was the aggrieved party to do?

If the thief who stole the goods was caught, he was to make restitution. But if there was no one to pin the crime on, the matter was to be brought before God. In a case like this, it would only be natural for suspicion to arise concerning the trustworthiness of the one who had been entrusted with the goods. If the valuables disappeared while under his watch, should he be held responsible for the victim's compensation?

In these kinds of cases, the matter was to be brought before God.

“...the owner of the house shall come near to God to show whether or not he has put his hand to his neighbor's property.” – Exodus 22:8 ESV

The Hebrew word used here is *ha'elohim* and it can be translated as “the gods.” It is most likely a reference to the elders within the community who were assigned the task of judging these kinds of situations. This was the protocol established by Moses on the advice of Jethro, his father-in-law.

“...look for able men from all the people, men who fear God, who are trustworthy and hate a bribe, and place such men over the people as chiefs of thousands, of hundreds, of fifties, and of tens. And let them judge the people at all times. Every great matter they shall bring to you, but any small matter they shall decide themselves.” – Exodus 18:21-22 ESV

These trustworthy men were to assess the situation and determine the guilt or innocence of the one from whose home the goods were taken. If the judges arrive at a guilty verdict, the neighbor was to make restitution, paying the victim double the value of the stolen property.

If the missing property happened to be an ox, sheep, or goat, the same criteria were to be applied. If the judges deemed the neighbor did nothing wrong, the owner of the property was to accept their verdict as final and binding. But if they determined the neighbor to be guilty of theft, he was expected to make full restitution.

The final case involves responsibility for borrowed goods. If a man borrows anything of value from a neighbor, he will be held responsible for its care and ultimate return. If it is stolen, he

will compensate his neighbor for its value. If it is damaged, he will make restitution. But God provides an important caveat. If the owner of the object is present when the item is damaged, the borrower is not to be held accountable. If it involves the case of an animal being rented out and the animal is injured or killed, the owner will receive compensation from the rental price he charged. Any loss he suffers is to be written off as the cost of doing business.

These laws, while quite specific, are not intended to be exhaustive in nature. They provide practical principles for dealing with the myriad of scenarios that might come up in daily life. Communal living can be difficult. Living in close proximity to others can lead to all kinds of conflicts and create a perfect storm of controversies that can do damage to the community and bring dishonor to the name of God. So, the Almighty went out of His way to establish clear criteria for how to live with integrity in the midst of community.

Live Like Who You Are

¹⁶ *"If a man seduces a virgin who is not betrothed and lies with her, he shall give the bride-price for her and make her his wife. ¹⁷ If her father utterly refuses to give her to him, he shall pay money equal to the bride-price for virgins.*

¹⁸ *"You shall not permit a sorceress to live.*

¹⁹ *"Whoever lies with an animal shall be put to death.*

²⁰ *"Whoever sacrifices to any god, other than the Lord alone, shall be devoted to destruction.*

²¹ *"You shall not wrong a sojourner or oppress him, for you were sojourners in the land of Egypt.*

²² *You shall not mistreat any widow or fatherless child. ²³ If you do mistreat them, and they cry out to me, I will surely hear their cry, ²⁴ and my wrath will burn, and I will kill you with the sword, and your wives shall become widows and your children fatherless.*

²⁵ *"If you lend money to any of my people with you who is poor, you shall not be like a moneylender to him, and you shall not exact interest from him. ²⁶ If ever you take your neighbor's cloak in pledge, you shall return it to him before the sun goes down, ²⁷ for that is his only covering, and it is his cloak for his body; in what else shall he sleep? And if he cries to me, I will hear, for I am compassionate.*

²⁸ *"You shall not revile God, nor curse a ruler of your people.*

²⁹ *"You shall not delay to offer from the fullness of your harvest and from the outflow of your presses. The firstborn of your sons you shall give to me. ³⁰ You shall do the same with your oxen and with your sheep: seven days it shall be with its mother; on the eighth day you shall give it to me.*

³¹ *"You shall be consecrated to me. Therefore you shall not eat any flesh that is torn by beasts in the field; you shall throw it to the dogs. – Exodus 22:16-31 ESV*

When we view these laws from our modern vantage point, they appear to be rather random, a bit disjointed, and difficult to apply to our current context. Their heavy emphasis on an agrarian economy and their seeming endorsement of slavery makes them sound antiquated and no longer applicable. They come across as nothing more than a list of ancient legal codes from a bygone era.

But these laws are the divine directives passed down from Yahweh to His people and, as such, they provide important insight into His character. These civil laws were meant to direct the daily interactions of His people. He was leaving nothing to chance. The level of detail and specificity found in these laws reveals that God cared deeply about every area of His people's lives. It was not enough that they refrain from worshiping false gods. Their love for Him must be

reflected in their care for one another. It was together that they formed His treasured possession. It was as a community that they would best reflect His character and display His glory among the nations. These rather arbitrary-sounding laws were meant to dictate and determine their interactions with one another. He wanted them to love one another well.

The apostle Paul picks up on this communal context in his first letter to the believers in Corinth. He used the analogy of the human body to drive home the God-ordained interdependency of the members of the body of Christ. Each Christ-follower has been carefully placed within the context of a local church body and it is within that communal atmosphere that the life-transforming power of God is best displayed.

...our bodies have many parts, and God has put each part just where he wants it. How strange a body would be if it had only one part! Yes, there are many parts, but only one body. The eye can never say to the hand, "I don't need you." The head can't say to the feet, "I don't need you."

In fact, some parts of the body that seem weakest and least important are actually the most necessary. And the parts we regard as less honorable are those we clothe with the greatest care. So we carefully protect those parts that should not be seen, while the more honorable parts do not require this special care. So God has put the body together such that extra honor and care are given to those parts that have less dignity. This makes for harmony among the members, so that all the members care for each other. If one part suffers, all the parts suffer with it, and if one part is honored, all the parts are glad.

All of you together are Christ's body, and each of you is a part of it. – 1 Corinthians 12:18-27 NLT

So, in reading these civil codes of conduct, it is important to see the timeless principles they contain. They were meant to guide the Israelites into greater godliness – so that they might better reflect the character of the Lawgiver. He is holy and He expects the people who bear His name to model their lives after His example – not perfectly, but faithfully. The fact that they would fail is built into these laws. These civil codes reveal what was to happen when someone fell short of God's righteous standard. There were to be consequences. Penalties were to be enforced. Restitution was to be made. Relationships were to be restored. God was to be honored.

Verse 15 contains rules about borrowing. Then, as if out of nowhere, verse 16 abruptly shifts to rules about premarital sex. But there is actually a vital link between these two verses. The Hebrew word translated as "borrows" is לִשָּׁא (šā'al), and it can also be translated as "to ask for."

In verse 16, the Hebrew word translated as "seduces" is פָּתָה (pātâ), and it means "to persuade." In both cases, words play a critical role. One man "asks for" something he wants to

borrow. Another man “persuades” a young woman in order to get what he wants – her hand in marriage. This is not about rape, but about premarital sex. The man loves the young woman and wants to marry her but fails to keep things in their proper and appropriate order.

“...in this case the couple’s intercourse was consensual. It was a seduction in the true sense of the word. The woman was receptive to the man’s advances, for when the Bible says the man ‘seduces’ (Exodus 22:16), it means “he persuades the girl and she consents,” – Philip Graham Ryken, *Exodus: Saved For God’s Glory*

This law was intended to deal with the inevitable cases of sexual promiscuity among young people within the community. Driven by their hormones, they would be tempted to forego God’s plan for courtship, marriage, and sex, and rearrange the order to meet their out-of-control passions. When that happened, there were rules to follow. The father of the girl could either refuse or accept the young man’s request to marry her. Either way, the young man was required to pay the bride-price. Through his actions, he had “bought” the young girl and made her his own – now he had to pay the price.

With her virginity taken from her, the young girl was in a precarious position. She would be considered “damaged goods” by other men in the community, making it virtually impossible for her to find a husband. So, if the man who “persuaded” her to have sex with him refused to marry her, he was obligated to set her up financially for the future. If he chose to go through with the marriage, he also had to make a financial commitment to prove his intentions. God expected this young man, who had done the wrong thing, to follow it up by doing the right thing. He was to take responsibility.

The next three verses take another abrupt turn, dealing with witchcraft, bestiality, and idolatry. While they appear to be completely disconnected, these three crimes all demand the death penalty because they all involve false worship. A sorcerous was someone who communicated with the dead in order to cast spells and tell fortunes. They claimed to possess supernatural powers that allowed them to foretell the future and control the fates of others. They were pretending to be like God and leading the people away from His will.

The prohibition against bestiality was a direct indictment of the pagan practices of the other nations that occupied the land of Canaan. Because of their emphasis on false gods, these cultures actually celebrated this form of deviancy by incorporating it into their worship. The Canaanites actually depicted their god, Baal, as having intercourse with a cow. And worshipers were encouraged to emulate the actions of their sacred deity. So this law was not out of place or unnecessary. It was a direct indictment of the nations that occupied the land God had promised to Israel, and He wanted them to understand that this kind of behavior was completely off-limits and deserving of death.

In fact, God makes it clear that anyone who makes any kind of sacrifice to a false god is worthy of death. He would not tolerate unfaithfulness among His people.

The remaining verses of chapter 22 focus on God's compassion for the helpless and hopeless within the covenant community. These laws target the treatment of strangers, widows, orphans, and the poor. God would not tolerate the mistreatment of the disenfranchised and disadvantaged. He knew it would be easy to take advantage of the less fortunate because they had no means of defending themselves. So, He placed strict guidelines on all interactions with these individuals. They were to be seen as a protected class and treated with compassion. And failure to do so would result in dire consequences.

"If you exploit them in any way and they cry out to me, then I will certainly hear their cry. My anger will blaze against you, and I will kill you with the sword. Then your wives will be widows and your children fatherless." – Exodus 22:23-24 NLT

Even allowing a neighbor to suffer discomfort by refusing to return his coat would bring down the wrath of God.

"If you do not return it and your neighbor cries out to me for help, then I will hear, for I am merciful." – Exodus 22:27 NLT

Ultimately, all their actions were to be seen as evidence of their relationship with God. If they mistreated and abused one another, they were demonstrating their lack of regard for God's law and their disregard for His character. Even their refusal to treat His appointed leaders with respect was nothing less than a refusal to honor Him as God.

God deserved their honor. He had earned it through His gracious redemption of them from slavery in Egypt. He expected them to keep their covenant commitments, including the dedication of their firstborn. At the Passover, He had spared all the firstborns of Israel. Now, he expected them to honor their commitment by dedicating the firstborns to Him.

God had consecrated the people of Israel as His own possession. They belonged to Him and expected them to live in keeping with their new identity. They were to be a holy people, living distinctively different lives from all their pagan neighbors.

"Now therefore, if you will indeed obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession among all peoples, for all the earth is mine; and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation." – Exodus 19:5-6 ESV

Their actions were to match their identity. Their behavior was to reflect their new ownership. They were God's chosen people, and they were to act like it.

Conduits of God's Love

¹ *"You shall not spread a false report. You shall not join hands with a wicked man to be a malicious witness. ² You shall not fall in with the many to do evil, nor shall you bear witness in a lawsuit, siding with the many, so as to pervert justice, ³ nor shall you be partial to a poor man in his lawsuit.*

⁴ *"If you meet your enemy's ox or his donkey going astray, you shall bring it back to him. ⁵ If you see the donkey of one who hates you lying down under its burden, you shall refrain from leaving him with it; you shall rescue it with him.*

⁶ *"You shall not pervert the justice due to your poor in his lawsuit. ⁷ Keep far from a false charge, and do not kill the innocent and righteous, for I will not acquit the wicked. ⁸ And you shall take no bribe, for a bribe blinds the clear-sighted and subverts the cause of those who are in the right.*

⁹ *"You shall not oppress a sojourner. You know the heart of a sojourner, for you were sojourners in the land of Egypt." – Exodus 23:1-9 ESV*

The laws contained in the Book of the Covenant were meant to provide practical applications of the Ten Commandments to real-life scenarios. The ninth commandment stated, "You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor" (Exodus 20:16 ESV). But how was that commandment to be applied in everyday life? The first three verses of chapter 23 provide an answer.

God warns His people about spreading false and potentially malicious rumors about one another. As mentioned before, all of these laws were intended to inculcate and reflect God's character. Yahweh expected His chosen people to mirror His passion for truth and justice, and you can't have one without the other. Falsehood makes justice impossible because it paints an inaccurate picture of reality. To spread a false report about someone is to purposefully twist the truth about them in order to denigrate their character in the eyes of others. At its most basic level, a false report is a lie intended to damage another person's reputation. This kind of action can be subtle and take the form of idle gossip but, as God points out, it can also escalate into a coordinated attack designed to deny the other person a just outcome in a trial.

"You must not cooperate with evil people by lying on the witness stand." – Exodus 23:1 NLT

In the case of a trial, it might be easy to take sides against an individual and be pressured to provide false and incriminating testimony. But God forbids such sinful behavior. His priority is always truth and He will not tolerate those who twist the truth for their own personal gain or in order to enact their own brand of justice.

“You must not follow the crowd in doing wrong. When you are called to testify in a dispute, do not be swayed by the crowd to twist justice. And do not slant your testimony in favor of a person just because that person is poor.” – Exodus 23:2-3 NLT

Justice thrives on the truth and a spirit of favoritism that fosters inaccurate and falsely slanted details will make it impossible to achieve a just and righteous outcome. When it comes to the truth, taking sides is the worst thing you can do. Allowing someone’s personal circumstances to cloud your judgment can be a dangerous thing. That’s why, in a courtroom environment, God prohibits lying on someone’s behalf just because they are poor. But He goes on to warn, “In a lawsuit, you must not deny justice to the poor” (Exodus 23:7 NLT). His people were not to let their personal feelings cloud their judgment or tempt them to falsify the facts. They were to stick to the truth and let justice take its course.

He wanted His people to follow His example. As a just and righteous God, He would “never declare a guilty person to be innocent” (Exodus 23:7 NLT). And He expected His people to follow His righteous standards.

“Be sure never to charge anyone falsely with evil. Never sentence an innocent or blameless person to death...” – Exodus 23:7 NLT

God knew the Israelites would find it difficult to adhere to His law. There would be constant temptations to twist the truth, either out of favoritism or personal gain. That’s why He prohibited the taking of bribes. Money can exert a powerful pull on even the most righteous person, causing them to play fast and loose with the truth in order to profit from their perjury.

There were certain groups within Israelite society that God knew would never get a fair shake. One, in particular, was made up of “sojourners” or “strangers.” These were the non-Israelites or foreigners who had chosen to accompany God’s people when they left Egypt. These individuals would always find it difficult to get a fair trial because of their outsider status. That’s why God warned His people, “You must not oppress foreigners. You know what it’s like to be a foreigner, for you yourselves were once foreigners in the land of Egypt” (Exodus 23:9 NLT).

The Israelites knew what it was like to be an outsider. They had lived for centuries as strangers in a strange land and faced open ridicule and hatred for their identity. Now that they were in the majority, they would be tempted to treat the strangers in their midst with a certain degree of suspicion and even disdain. But God wanted them to treat all people justly and fairly.

And this righteous behavior was not to be reserved just for the courtroom. In their everyday actions with one another, they were to put God’s passion for truth and justice on full display. They were to do the right thing – at all times.

“If you come upon your enemy’s ox or donkey that has strayed away, take it back to its owner. If you see that the donkey of someone who hates you has collapsed under its load, do not walk by. Instead, stop and help.” – Exodus 23:4-5 NLT

Everyday life would provide plenty of opportunities to treat one another with love and respect. As they went about their daily routines, they would run into scenarios that required them to put truth and justice on display. To fail to do the right thing is to do the wrong thing. Refusing to return a neighbor's wandering donkey is tantamount to stealing it. You had the opportunity to do the right thing and chose to ignore it.

And God warns against decision-making based on personal grudges. The identity of the animal's owner should have no bearing on whether you offer aid. The right response should be driven solely by a desire to do the right thing – that which God would have you do. And Jesus would pick up on this same idea in His sermon on the mount.

“You have heard the law that says, ‘Love your neighbor’ and hate your enemy. But I say, love your enemies! Pray for those who persecute you! In that way, you will be acting as true children of your Father in heaven. For he gives his sunlight to both the evil and the good, and he sends rain on the just and the unjust alike. If you love only those who love you, what reward is there for that? Even corrupt tax collectors do that much. If you are kind only to your friends, how are you different from anyone else? Even pagans do that. But you are to be perfect, even as your Father in heaven is perfect.” – Matthew 5:43-48
NLT

Notice how Jesus portrays right actions as a sign of identity. Doing the right thing provides undeniable evidence of one's relationship with God. The children of God mimic the character of their Father. They follow His lead and foster an atmosphere of truth and justice through the way they live their lives. No favoritism. No falsehood. No prejudice or premeditated partiality. God expects His children to serve as conduits of His grace and mercy to all those around them.

No Compromise

¹⁰ *“For six years you shall sow your land and gather in its yield, ¹¹ but the seventh year you shall let it rest and lie fallow, that the poor of your people may eat; and what they leave the beasts of the field may eat. You shall do likewise with your vineyard, and with your olive orchard.*

¹² *“Six days you shall do your work, but on the seventh day you shall rest; that your ox and your donkey may have rest, and the son of your servant woman, and the alien, may be refreshed.*

¹³ *“Pay attention to all that I have said to you, and make no mention of the names of other gods, nor let it be heard on your lips.*

¹⁴ *“Three times in the year you shall keep a feast to me. ¹⁵ You shall keep the Feast of Unleavened Bread. As I commanded you, you shall eat unleavened bread for seven days at the appointed time in the month of Abib, for in it you came out of Egypt. None shall appear before me empty-handed. ¹⁶ You shall keep the Feast of Harvest, of the firstfruits of your labor, of what you sow in the field. You shall keep the Feast of Ingathering at the end of the year, when you gather in from the field the fruit of your labor. ¹⁷ Three times in the year shall all your males appear before the Lord God.*

¹⁸ *“You shall not offer the blood of my sacrifice with anything leavened, or let the fat of my feast remain until the morning.*

¹⁹ *“The best of the firstfruits of your ground you shall bring into the house of the Lord your God.*

“You shall not boil a young goat in its mother’s milk. – Exodus 23:10-19 ESV

The next two laws continue God’s focus on truth and justice. While they appear to be dealing with the required Sabbath observances, there is more to these two commands than cessation from work or allowing the land to “rest” in the seventh year. The point behind these commands is love as expressed in concern for others.

God’s Sabbath laws were designed to provide physical rest, but they were also intended to minister to the needs of the less fortunate. In the case of the Sabbath year, God decreed that each seventh year, the people were to rest from their cultivation and care of the fields and orchards.

“Plant and harvest your crops for six years, but let the land be renewed and lie uncultivated during the seventh year.” – Exodus 23:10-11 NLT

These two laws anticipated the Israelite’s pending occupation of the land of Canaan. Seven years after they arrived in the land and took possession of it, they would be expected to enact this command. For six years they would labor and tend the land, but in the seventh year, they would take a God-ordained break so that the land could be renewed and restored.

But there was another point to this command. God wanted His people to care for the poor and needy among them.

“...let the poor among you harvest whatever grows on its own. Leave the rest for wild animals to eat. The same applies to your vineyards and olive groves.” – Exodus 23:11 NLT

For six years, God would meet the needs of His people and provide plenty of food to sustain them through the seventh year. This would echo His establishment of the Sabbath day.

“Look, I’m going to rain down food from heaven for you. Each day the people can go out and pick up as much food as they need for that day. I will test them in this to see whether or not they will follow my instructions. On the sixth day they will gather food, and when they prepare it, there will be twice as much as usual.” – Exodus 16:4-5 NLT

“Eat this food today, for today is a Sabbath day dedicated to the Lord. There will be no food on the ground today. You may gather the food for six days, but the seventh day is the Sabbath. There will be no food on the ground that day.” – Exodus 16:25-26 NLT

The Sabbath year was to mirror the Sabbath day. God wanted His people to believe in His divine providence. He was their provider and sustainer. He would care for all their needs. And when the people finally settled in the land of Canaan, they would have to be reminded that everything they possessed had been given to them by God.

“I gave you land you had not worked on, and I gave you towns you did not build—the towns where you are now living. I gave you vineyards and olive groves for food, though you did not plant them.” – Joshua 24:13 NLT

So, if God had graciously provided for all their needs, they were to reciprocate by sharing God’s bounty with the less fortunate among them, including the wild animals. God’s blessings were to be shared, not hoarded. By allowing their fields and vineyards to go uncultivated, they would experience no diminishment in crop yield. In fact, God would miraculously produce a bumper harvest that would meet the needs of all – without their help. God would step in and bless His creation for the benefit of all His creatures. And the Israelites were expected to participate in this gracious act of benevolence by simply resting and relying upon God’s goodness.

And God applied the same principle to the Sabbath day.

“You have six days each week for your ordinary work, but on the seventh day you must stop working. This gives your ox and your donkey a chance to rest. It also allows your slaves and the foreigners living among you to be refreshed.” – Exodus 23:12 NLT

Notice the emphasis on others. God wanted His people to share His concern for all creation. He knew that they would be tempted to view their status as His chosen people as a badge of honor

and look down on others with an air of superiority. But their designation as His treasured possession did not give them the right to treat others with contempt. They had an obligation to use their status as God's people as a means to reflect His character through their actions. Their unique relationship with Yahweh was meant to benefit all those around them, including their livestock.

God ends this section with a warning: "Pay close attention to all my instructions. You must not call on the name of any other gods. Do not even speak their names" (Exodus 23:13 NLT). This was a call to obedience and obeisance. God wanted their adherence to His commands as well as their unwavering devotion to His Lordship over their lives. He was looking for total commitment, not half-hearted compliance. This was about more than a list of rules to keep. It was about faithfulness and choosing to live in a way that reflected God's character and demonstrated His glory.

The next commandments have to do with the annual feasts and festivals that God would establish for His people. Once again, these annual events were intended to take place once the Israelites took possession of the land of Canaan. But God had let Pharaoh know that these festivals were the whole reason He was demanding the release of His people.

*"This is what the Lord, the God of Israel, says: Let my people go **so they may hold a festival in my honor in the wilderness.**" – Exodus 5:1 NLT*

*Moses replied, "We will all go—**young and old, our sons and daughters, and our flocks and herds. We must all join together in celebrating a festival to the Lord.**" – Exodus 10:9 NLT*

With their exodus from Egypt, the Israelites began a pilgrimage to the promised land, and the three festivals outlined in this chapter were intended to be pilgrim feasts. The first came in the spring: The Feast of Unleavened Bread. This feast was directly tied to the Feast of Passover, and both pointed back to that eventful night in Egypt when God protected His people from the judgment of the death angel (Exodus 12).

God had established the Feast of Unleavened Bread as a perpetual ordinance designed to recall His divine deliverance of them from their captivity in Egypt.

"This is a day to remember forever—the day you left Egypt, the place of your slavery. Today the Lord has brought you out by the power of his mighty hand. (Remember, eat no food containing yeast.) On this day in early spring, in the month of Abib, you have been set free. You must celebrate this event in this month each year after the Lord brings you into the land of the Canaanites, Hittites, Amorites, Hivites, and Jebusites. (He swore to your ancestors that he would give you this land—a land flowing with milk and honey.) For seven days the bread you eat must be made without yeast. Then on the seventh day, celebrate a feast to the Lord. Eat bread without yeast during those seven days. In fact,

there must be no yeast bread or any yeast at all found within the borders of your land during this time.” – Exodus 13:3-7 NLT

This feast was intended to be a liberation celebration. And two months later, it was to be followed by a second feast: The Feast of the Harvest. This particular festival was designed to show gratitude to God for all His provision. Also known as the Feast of Firstfruits, this annual event was a way for the Israelites to return thanks to God for His gracious providence over their lives.

Seven months after Passover, the Israelites were to celebrate a third feast: The Feast of Ingathering. This festival took place in the autumn after all the crops had been harvested and safely stored. During this week-long event, the Israelites were to live in temporary shelters as a reminder of their years wandering in the wilderness. That is why this festival is also referred to as the Feast of Booths or the Feast of Tabernacles.

“You must observe this festival to the Lord for seven days every year. This is a permanent law for you, and it must be observed in the appointed month from generation to generation. For seven days you must live outside in little shelters. All native-born Israelites must live in shelters. This will remind each new generation of Israelites that I made their ancestors live in shelters when I rescued them from the land of Egypt. I am the Lord your God.” – Leviticus 23:41-43 NLT

The commemoration of these annual feasts or festivals also required blood sacrifices. There was a cost to keeping these ordinances. Numbers 29 records that, during the Feast of Ingathering, the Israelites were required to make sacrifices for eight consecutive days, and the number of animals offered up was substantial. There were also grain offerings, liquid offerings, burnt offerings, and sin offerings. And according to Exodus 23, there were strict requirements as to how these offerings were to be made. God was very specific. And while these laws might sound strange to our modern ears, they were designed to illustrate the reality of sin and man’s need for redemption. Even the prohibition against boiling “a young goat in its mother’s milk” (Exodus 23:19) was meant as a protection for God’s people. It’s likely that this was a practice among the Canaanites and part of their idolatrous worship. But it also conveys a powerful contrast concerning life and death. To boil a goat in its mother’s milk would be to use the source of life to bring about death. It would be an inappropriate and unacceptable sacrifice.

God was meticulous in the giving of His commands. He would not allow His people to adopt or adapt pagan practices as part of their worship of Him. Whether it was the Sabbath observances or the annual feasts, the laws God ordained were binding and not up for debate or alteration. God’s will must be done in God’s way. No compromise. No cutting corners.

A Land of Their Own

²⁰ “Behold, I send an angel before you to guard you on the way and to bring you to the place that I have prepared. ²¹ Pay careful attention to him and obey his voice; do not rebel against him, for he will not pardon your transgression, for my name is in him.

²² “But if you carefully obey his voice and do all that I say, then I will be an enemy to your enemies and an adversary to your adversaries.

²³ “When my angel goes before you and brings you to the Amorites and the Hittites and the Perizzites and the Canaanites, the Hivites and the Jebusites, and I blot them out, ²⁴ you shall not bow down to their gods nor serve them, nor do as they do, but you shall utterly overthrow them and break their pillars in pieces. ²⁵ You shall serve the Lord your God, and he will bless your bread and your water, and I will take sickness away from among you. ²⁶ None shall miscarry or be barren in your land; I will fulfill the number of your days. ²⁷ I will send my terror before you and will throw into confusion all the people against whom you shall come, and I will make all your enemies turn their backs to you. ²⁸ And I will send hornets before you, which shall drive out the Hivites, the Canaanites, and the Hittites from before you. ²⁹ I will not drive them out from before you in one year, lest the land become desolate and the wild beasts multiply against you. ³⁰ Little by little I will drive them out from before you, until you have increased and possess the land. ³¹ And I will set your border from the Red Sea to the Sea of the Philistines, and from the wilderness to the Euphrates, for I will give the inhabitants of the land into your hand, and you shall drive them out before you. ³² You shall make no covenant with them and their gods. ³³ They shall not dwell in your land, lest they make you sin against me; for if you serve their gods, it will surely be a snare to you.” – Exodus 23:20-33 ESV

After giving Moses the content of the Book of the Covenant, God assured His chosen leader that he would not be alone. The task of leading the Israelites would not be an easy one and the added responsibility of administering the law of God was going to make Moses’ job even more difficult. So, God informed Moses that he would have divine assistance.

“I am sending an angel before you to protect you on your journey and lead you safely to the place I have prepared for you.” – Exodus 23:20 NLT

The Hebrew word for angel is מַלְאָךְ (*mal’akh*) which means “messenger” or “angel.” This was not the first time that God had employed an angel to serve as protection for His people. When the Israelites first departed Egypt, they were confronted by Pharaoh and his army at the western shore of the Red Sea. With their backs against the unpassable sea and their eyes looking at the 600 chariots of Pharaoh bearing down on them, the people panicked and began to complain to Moses about their dire predicament. But God responded by placing His angel between the Israelites and the Egyptians.

Then the angel of God who was going before the host of Israel moved and went behind them, and the pillar of cloud moved from before them and stood behind them, coming

between the host of Egypt and the host of Israel. And there was the cloud and the darkness. And it lit up the night without one coming near the other all night. – Exodus 14:19-20 ESV

We are not told whether the angel was visible to the human eye, but his presence held off the Egyptian forces all during the night, giving the Israelites time to cross the parted Red Sea. And in the morning, when the Egyptians attempted to pursue their prey, ‘the waters returned and covered all the chariots and charioteers—the entire army of Pharaoh. Of all the Egyptians who had chased the Israelites into the sea, not a single one survived’ (Exodus 14:28 NLT). And the remaining Egyptians who had not pursued the Israelites watched in horror as their comrades drowned in the waters of the Red Sea, and they responded in fear.

“Let us flee from before Israel, for the Lord fights for them against the Egyptians.” – Exodus 14:25 ESV

There are those who believe that this angel was actually the Lord Himself. Moses describes the defeat of the Egyptians as having been the work of Yahweh.

...just before dawn the Lord looked down on the Egyptian army from the pillar of fire and cloud, and he threw their forces into total confusion. He twisted their chariot wheels, making their chariots difficult to drive. – Exodus 14:24-25 NLT

In the book of Joshua, there is another incident involving a divine being. On this occasion, Joshua encounters what appears to be an armed soldier.

When Joshua was by Jericho, he lifted up his eyes and looked, and behold, a man was standing before him with his drawn sword in his hand. And Joshua went to him and said to him, “Are you for us, or for our adversaries?” And he said, “No; but I am the commander of the army of the Lord. Now I have come.” And Joshua fell on his face to the earth and worshiped and said to him, “What does my lord say to his servant?” And the commander of the Lord’s army said to Joshua, “Take off your sandals from your feet, for the place where you are standing is holy.” And Joshua did so. – Joshua 5:13-15 ESV

Whether these appearances are divine manifestations of God Himself or references to angelic beings is impossible to tell. But God is clearly telling Moses that he will have divine assistance and guidance along the way. He will not be alone in his administration of the law and his leadership of the people of Israel. But this “angel of the Lord” must be obeyed.

“Pay careful attention to him and obey his voice; do not rebel against him, for he will not pardon your transgression, for my name is in him.” – Exodus 23:21 ESV

This angel would serve and act on behalf of God, bearing the full weight of Yahweh’s name. So, Moses and the people were expected to obey the angel as they would the Lord. And if they did, they would enjoy God’s blessings.

“...if you are careful to obey him, following all my instructions, then I will be an enemy to your enemies, and I will oppose those who oppose you.” – Exodus 23:22 NLT

The angel would lead the people to Canaan, then provide them with victory over the nations that occupied the land. But God expected His people to completely annihilate the Amorites, Hittites, Perizzites, Canaanites, Hivites, and Jebusites. They were to clean house, purging the land of all its former occupants. There was to be no compromise or concessions made. And God gave His reasons for demanding the total extermination of the Canaanite population.

“You must not worship the gods of these nations or serve them in any way or imitate their evil practices. Instead, you must utterly destroy them and smash their sacred pillars.” – Exodus 23:24 NLT

God knew that if the Canaanites were allowed to live, they would lead the Israelites astray. Their pagan practices would become a temptation to God’s people, causing them to stray from their covenant commitment to Him. God would later reiterate this command as the people prepared to enter the land of Canaan.

“When the LORD your God hands these nations over to you and you conquer them, you must completely destroy them. Make no treaties with them and show them no mercy. You must not intermarry with them. Do not let your daughters and sons marry their sons and daughters, for they will lead your children away from me to worship other gods. Then the anger of the LORD will burn against you, and he will quickly destroy you. This is what you must do. You must break down their pagan altars and shatter their sacred pillars. Cut down their Asherah poles and burn their idols. For you are a holy people, who belong to the LORD your God. Of all the people on earth, the LORD your God has chosen you to be his own special treasure.” – Deuteronomy 7:22-26 NLT

God demanded undivided allegiance from His people. In return for their faithfulness, He would bless them beyond belief. He would make them fruitful and prosperous in the land.

“I will bless you with food and water, and I will protect you from illness. There will be no miscarriages or infertility in your land, and I will give you long, full lives.” – Exodus 23:25-26 NLT

And He promised to drive all the inhabitants from the land. Despite their military superiority, the nations of Canaan would prove no match for the Israelites. But God would not eliminate them all at once. The process of conquering and occupying the land would take years. That would prevent the land from becoming desolate and overrun by wild animals. It would take time for the Israelites to acclimate to their new surroundings, so God provided a strategy that would allow their occupation of the land to take place over time.

“I will drive them out a little at a time until your population has increased enough to take possession of the land.” – Exodus 23:30 NLT

But in time, the Israelites would find themselves the proud possessors of the land of promise. God would give them the entire land of Canaan, “from the Red Sea to the Mediterranean Sea, and from the eastern wilderness to the Euphrates River” (Exodus 23:31 NLT). But within this vast and fertile territory, God expected His people to serve Him alone. There would be no place for unfaithfulness and no room for the false gods of the Canaanites.

“Make no treaties with them or their gods. They must not live in your land, or they will cause you to sin against me. If you serve their gods, you will be caught in the trap of idolatry.” – Exodus 23:32-33 NLT

God promised victory but demanded obedience. He offered to bless His chosen people, but they were obligated to remain faithful to Him alone. And since the eradication of the Canaanites would take time, God knew that His people would face a constant temptation to compromise their convictions by assimilating the false gods of their pagan neighbors. Inter-marriage with the occupants of the land would sound appealing and profitable. Adopting the ways of the Canaanites would make good sense. And peace treaties would always be more attractive than the prospects of war. So God laid down the law. He completely prohibited any thought of compromise on the part of His people. They were His chosen people, and they were expected to live distinctively different lives from the rest of the nations of the world.

“...you are a holy people, who belong to the LORD your God. Of all the people on earth, the LORD your God has chosen you to be his own special treasure.” – Deuteronomy 7:26 NLT

The Covenant Confirmed

¹ Then he said to Moses, “Come up to the Lord, you and Aaron, Nadab, and Abihu, and seventy of the elders of Israel, and worship from afar. ² Moses alone shall come near to the Lord, but the others shall not come near, and the people shall not come up with him.”

³ Moses came and told the people all the words of the Lord and all the rules. And all the people answered with one voice and said, “All the words that the Lord has spoken we will do.” ⁴ And Moses wrote down all the words of the Lord. He rose early in the morning and built an altar at the foot of the mountain, and twelve pillars, according to the twelve tribes of Israel. ⁵ And he sent young men of the people of Israel, who offered burnt offerings and sacrificed peace offerings of oxen to the Lord. ⁶ And Moses took half of the blood and put it in basins, and half of the blood he threw against 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 And Moses took the blood and threw it on the people and said, “Behold the blood of the covenant that the Lord has made with you in accordance with all these words.” – Exodus 24:1-8 NLT

Prior to giving Moses the Decalogue and the Book of the Covenant, God warned the people of Israel that they would be expected to obey His commands.

“You yourselves have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles’ wings and brought you to myself. Now therefore, if you will indeed obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession among all peoples, for all the earth is mine; and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.” – Exodus 19:4-6 ESV

Their ongoing status as His chosen people depended upon their willingness to keep the covenant He was making with them. His laws were binding and the people’s adherence to them was non-optional. Now, the time had come for them to confirm their commitment to the covenant. In chapters 20-23, God laid out the terms of the covenant. He had clearly articulated the rules and regulations that would govern their behavior as His set-apart people. But those commandments would prove meaningless if the people refused to obey them. And if they refused to keep the commands that God had given them, they would be rejecting His authority and sovereignty over their lives. So, this chapter in the book of Exodus records a seminal moment in the lives of the people of Israel.

God instructed Moses to return to the top of Mount Sinai and instructed him to bring along his brother Aaron, his two sons, Nadab and Abihu, as well as 70 of the elders of Israel. But before this small contingent of Israelite leaders made their ascent of Mount Sinai, Moses “told the people all the words of the Lord and all the rules” (Exodus 24:3 ESV).

He took the time to communicate all the instructions and regulations given to him by God. From the more general laws of the Decalogue to the detailed and highly specific content of the

Book of the Covenant, Moses articulated clearly and carefully all the binding requirements of God.

In a sense, Moses was performing the role of a minister officiating a wedding ceremony between God and His bride, the nation of Israel. God had already expressed His vow to make the people of Israel His “own special treasure from among all the peoples on earth” (Exodus 19:5 NLT). He had chosen them as His own and pledged His intention to love and protect them. Now, it was their turn to state their vows, which they did with unwavering unity and enthusiasm.

And all the people answered with one voice and said, “All the words that the Lord has spoken we will do.” – Exodus 24:3 ESV

They had heard the terms of the marriage covenant and wholeheartedly agreed with them. With the covenant ratified, Moses took the time to document every one of God’s commandments, creating a permanent and unchanging contract between God and His people.

The next morning, Moses instructed the people to build an altar, and they would have done so by following the instructions given to them by God.

“Build for me an altar made of earth, and offer your sacrifices to me—your burnt offerings and peace offerings, your sheep and goats, and your cattle. Build my altar wherever I cause my name to be remembered, and I will come to you and bless you. If you use stones to build my altar, use only natural, uncut stones. Do not shape the stones with a tool, for that would make the altar unfit for holy use.” – Exodus 20:24-25 NLT

Along with the altar, the people were instructed to build 12 pillars, one for each of the 12 tribes of Israel. Then he commanded that burnt offerings and peace offerings be made to the Lord. The bulls used in these sacrifices were killed and their blood drained into basins. Moses took half of the blood and splashed it on the altar, an act of consecration and purification. Later, in the book of Leviticus, God explains the significance of the blood.

“...for the life of the body is in its blood. I have given you the blood on the altar to purify you, making you right with the Lord. It is the blood, given in exchange for a life, that makes purification possible.” – Leviticus 17:11 NLT

The author of the book of Hebrews picked up on this theme when he wrote:

Indeed, under the law almost everything is purified with blood, and without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins. – Hebrews 9:22 ESV

Moses was purifying the altar on which the offerings were made. This made the sacrifices acceptable to God. With the offerings completed, Moses read the Book of the Covenant out loud again, and the people reiterated their earlier commitment to obey.

“We will do everything the Lord has commanded. We will obey.” – Exodus 24:7 NLT

But then Moses did something unexpected and a bit unusual. He took the remaining blood in the basin and splattered it over the people. This rather gruesome scene offends our modern sensibilities, but it was meant to drive home a significant point. That blood had once pulsed through the veins of living creatures. But their lives had been sacrificed so that the people of Israel could be made pure and acceptable before God. Their sins had been atoned for through the death of another. And in sprinkling the blood on the people, Moses was covering over their unworthiness and sinfulness. He was presenting them as righteous before God, because of the atoning sacrifice of the sin substitute.

The author of Hebrews draws the vital connection between what Moses did that day and what Jesus later accomplished with His death on the cross.

With his own blood—not the blood of goats and calves—he entered the Most Holy Place once for all time and secured our redemption forever.

Under the old system, the blood of goats and bulls and the ashes of a heifer could cleanse people’s bodies from ceremonial impurity. Just think how much more the blood of Christ will purify our consciences from sinful deeds so that we can worship the living God. – Hebrews 9:12-14 NLT

The covenant-ratification ceremony that took place at the base of Mount Sinai was a worship service. God was purifying His people so that they could enter into His holy presence and worship Him. But, as Moses pointed out, the blood also sealed the covenant they had made.

“Look, this blood confirms the covenant the Lord has made with you in giving you these instructions.” – Exodus 24:8 NLT

Their words of affirmation had become binding. Their status as God’s chosen people had become permanent. Both parties were obligated to keep the covenant commitments they had made. And through their adherence to God’s laws, the people would be expressing their adoration of Him. Their obedience would symbolize their purity and illustrate their commitment to live as His chosen people.

Out of Sight, Out of Mind

⁹ Then Moses and Aaron, Nadab, and Abihu, and seventy of the elders of Israel went up, ¹⁰ and they saw the God of Israel. There was under his feet as it were a pavement of sapphire stone, like the very heaven for clearness. ¹¹ And he did not lay his hand on the chief men of the people of Israel; they beheld God, and ate and drank.

¹² The Lord said to Moses, “Come up to me on the mountain and wait there, that I may give you the tablets of stone, with the law and the commandment, which I have written for their instruction.” ¹³ So Moses rose with his assistant Joshua, and Moses went up into the mountain of God. ¹⁴ And he said to the elders, “Wait here for us until we return to you. And behold, Aaron and Hur are with you. Whoever has a dispute, let him go to them.”

¹⁵ Then Moses went up on the mountain, and the cloud covered the mountain. ¹⁶ The glory of the Lord dwelt on Mount Sinai, and the cloud covered it six days. And on the seventh day he called to Moses out of the midst of the cloud. ¹⁷ Now the appearance of the glory of the Lord was like a devouring fire on the top of the mountain in the sight of the people of Israel. ¹⁸ Moses entered the cloud and went up on the mountain. And Moses was on the mountain forty days and forty nights. – Exodus 24:9-18 ESV

After completing the ratification ceremony, Moses and his 73 companions made their way to the top of Mount Sinai, where they “they beheld God, and ate and drank” (Exodus 24:11 ESV). Over the centuries, these verses have confounded many Jews and Christians alike because they seem to contradict other Scriptures that deny man’s ability to look upon the face of God.

Later in the book of Exodus, Moses asks for permission to see the glory of God, and God responds by accommodating his request but with conditions.

“I will make all my goodness pass before you and will proclaim before you my name ‘The Lord.’ And I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show mercy on whom I will show mercy. But,” he said, “you cannot see my face, for man shall not see me and live.” And the Lord said, “Behold, there is a place by me where you shall stand on the rock, and while my glory passes by I will put you in a cleft of the rock, and I will cover you with my hand until I have passed by. Then I will take away my hand, and you shall see my back, but my face shall not be seen.” – Exodus 33:19-23 ESV

Yet the prophet, Isaiah, claims to have seen the Lord.

“I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up; and the train of his robe filled the temple.” – Isaiah 6:1 ESV

And Isaiah was shaken by the significance of his encounter with the Almighty.

*“Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts!” – Isaiah 6:5
ESV*

It is impossible to know exactly what Moses and Elijah saw, but both men were dramatically impacted by their experience. Elijah was struck by the weight of his own sinfulness, while Moses “immediately threw himself to the ground and worshiped” (Exodus 34:8 NLT).

The apostle John muddies the waters even further when he seems to categorically deny man’s capacity to look upon God. According to John, it was not until the incarnation of Jesus that humanity was able to gaze upon the glory of God.

And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.

No one has ever seen God; the only God, who is at the Father’s side, he has made him known. – John 1:14, 18 ESV

So, what happened that day on Mount Sinai? What exactly did Moses and the other men see? The text explicitly says, “they saw the God of Israel” (Exodus 24:10 ESV), and then it adds, “under his feet as it were a pavement of sapphire stone, like the very heaven for clearness” (Exodus 24:10 ESV). This description echoes the one given by Ezekiel after the heavens were opened and he “saw visions of God” (Ezekiel 1:1 ESV).

And above the expanse over their heads there was the likeness of a throne, in appearance like sapphire; and seated above the likeness of a throne was a likeness with a human appearance. And upward from what had the appearance of his waist I saw as it were gleaming metal, like the appearance of fire enclosed all around. And downward from what had the appearance of his waist I saw as it were the appearance of fire, and there was brightness around him. Like the appearance of the bow that is in the cloud on the day of rain, so was the appearance of the brightness all around.

Such was the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the Lord. And when I saw it, I fell on my face, and I heard the voice of one speaking. – Ezekiel 1:26-28 ESV

Ezekiel states that what he saw was “the appearance of the likeness of the glory of God” (Ezekiel 1:28 ESV). It was as if he knew that he had been gazing at the manifestation of God’s glory and not God Himself. But the experience left him prostrate on the ground in abject awe and reverence.

But when it came to Moses’ encounter with God on Mount Sinai, he clearly states that he and his companions “saw the God of Israel.” And then he adds a note of clarification.

And he did not lay his hand on the chief men of the people of Israel... – Exodus 24:11 ESV

Why did Moses include this statement? Could it be that he grasped the significance of the moment and understood that they were unworthy to stand before God? He seems to have known that God was too glorious and holy to be looked upon by mere men. Yet God did not strike them down. He graciously allowed these men to come before His presence and even dine with Him. This is in keeping with what God later said to Moses when he asked to see the Lord's glory.

"I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show mercy on whom I will show mercy." – Exodus 33:19 ESV

This entire encounter is described in just three verses. Few details are given. But it is meant to culminate the entire covenant ratification section. The law of God had been given, read, written down, and agreed to by the people. Now God sealed it by revealing Himself to the Israelite leadership. In doing so, He placed His divine approval on the covenant and demonstrated the gracious and merciful attitude He would show toward them.

We can only imagine how these men felt when they eventually had to part ways with God and make their way down the mountainside to the valley below. You would think that this once-in-a-lifetime encounter with God would have left them unalterably changed. But we know that the two sons of Aaron, who had joined their father on the mountaintop, would later commit an act that forced God to take their lives. Serving as priests alongside their father, "Nadab and Abihu, the sons of Aaron, each took his censer and put fire in it and laid incense on it and offered unauthorized fire before the Lord, which he had not commanded them" (Leviticus 10:1 ESV). As a result of their actions, "fire came out from before the Lord and consumed them, and they died before the Lord" (Leviticus 10:2 ESV).

Perhaps their earlier glimpse of God had made them overconfident and a bit too comfortable in their role as His priests. After all, they had dined with God and lived to tell about it. This may have left them feeling too familiar with God and too self-assured for their own good. They neglected to remember that God put a high value on obedience, and their decision to offer "unauthorized fire" proved to have deadly consequences.

Sometime after the Israelite leaders had come down from the mountain, God commanded Moses to return. This time, he was accompanied by Joshua. Aaron, Nadab, Abihu, and the 70 elders were told to remain behind and care for the people in Moses' absence.

God clearly explained the purpose of this latest trip up the mountain.

"Come up to me on the mountain and wait there, that I may give you the tablets of stone, with the law and the commandment, which I have written for their instruction." – Exodus 24:12 ESV

God had hand-written the Decalogue on tablets of stone. We know this from the book of Deuteronomy.

“And he declared to you his covenant, which he commanded you to perform, that is, the Ten Commandments, and he wrote them on two tablets of stone. And the Lord commanded me at that time to teach you statutes and rules, that you might do them in the land that you are going over to possess.” – Deuteronomy 4:13-14 ESV

The tablets of stone contained the Ten Commandments only. The Book of the Covenant was not included. But Moses had already made a written record of all those statutes and regulations. It is important to note that there were two tablets, not because God needed the additional space to contain all the ten commandments, but because He made two duplicate copies.

...he gave to Moses, when he had finished speaking with him on Mount Sinai, the two tablets of the testimony, tablets of stone, written with the finger of God. – Exodus 31:18 ESV

These were covenant documents, one copy for each of the parties in the agreement, and they had been drawn up by God Himself. They even bore His handwriting. These were not man-made laws, and they were not written on scrolls of papyrus. They were divine mandates from God Himself and engraved on tablets of stone. As such, they were to be viewed as binding and permanent.

Moses and Joshua made their way to the mountaintop, which was covered in a dark and foreboding storm cloud. As the leader of God’s people, Moses was required to enter the cloud of God’s presence and intercede with the Almighty. From the valley below, all the people could see was “a devouring fire on the top of the mountain” (Exodus 24:17 ESV). They knew this was a manifestation of God’s presence and power and it left them in a state of fear and awe.

But Moses was required to enter into this fearful storm and face the glory of God. For 40 days and 40 nights, Moses remained on the mountaintop as the people waited in the valley below. Ensclosed in the cloud of God’s glory, Moses found himself in the presence of the Almighty and serving as a secretary to the Lord of the universe. He would spend the entire time on Mount Sinai recording further instructions from God regarding everything from the design of the Ark of the Covenant and the Tabernacle to the institution of the priesthood and the Day of Atonement.

For the next seven chapters, Moses will painstakingly record all of God’s instructions. But as will become readily apparent, the people in the valley below soon lose interest in the events taking place high above them. They have no way of knowing what Moses is up to on the mountaintop. Their leader is nowhere to be found and it doesn’t take long before they become distracted and discomfited by his absence. And the contrast between chapters 25-30 and chapter 31 could not be any starker.

The mountaintop and the valley. In one place, God met with His servant and delivered His instructions for proper worship and reverence. But the people down below were far from God’s

presence and safely distanced from His glory. They could see the storm cloud high above their heads but felt no immediate threat. Their leader was gone and their God was distant and difficult to ascertain. He was holy and in the midst of delivering His requirements for proper worship, but they had lost interest. Both God and Moses were out of sight, out of mind. And in their case, the old adage – distance makes the heart grow fonder – was far from applicable.

