

Exodus 20:18-23:19

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[0:00] You want to open up your Bibles or Bible apps to Exodus 20.!

And as we've kind of tried to get our heads around the place of the law and the life of the Old Testament believers and what it means for us, hopefully we're seeing that the laws that were being given were not the paths on how to be saved because we know that God had already saved them. God had already redeemed them. But rather these were the paths for the saved. The paths of righteousness that the psalmist talked about in Psalm 23 that the shepherd leads in. Paths to help the believers, this new community of God's people freshly redeemed, to live their lives before their God.

Their identity, their character, security, all anchored in the Lord and enjoying the goodness into which he was calling them.

[1:18] A new life in which they were being called into before a holy God called to be a holy, a changed and changing people.

And that's really kind of where we're going to hang our thoughts for this passage today. A new life lived before a holy God as a holy people. So first of all, thinking about this holy God, chapter 20, verse 18, when the people saw the thunder.

So this, if you weren't here last week, just given the Ten Commandments. Chapter 20, verse 18, when the people saw the thunder and lightning, heard the trumpet, saw the mountain and smoke, they trembled with fear.

They stayed at a distance and said to Moses, well, hey, you just speak to us yourself and then we will listen. But do not have God speak to us or we'll die. Verse 20, Moses said to the people, do not be afraid.

God has come to test you so that the fear of God will keep you from sinning. So the people remained at a distance while Moses approached the thick darkness where God was.

[2:26] Verse 20 is interesting, isn't it? Do not be afraid. God has come to test you so that the fear of God will be with you to keep you from sinning. Tim Chester describes it as a kind of a, you don't need to be afraid, but be afraid.

The two things at the same time. As we've said in the past, there are 365 do not be afrails in the scripture. One for every day of the year.

It's a phrase that we're meant to take comfort from and was given as a comfort when it was given each time. But there's something helpful in verse 20, isn't there?

That the one whom we call upon, the one who we trust as we hear his voice, as he calms and stills our fears when he says, do not be afraid. The one whom we call upon as father, the God who has saved us.

Well, it's exactly that. He is God. He is God. By definition, a being of whom there is none greater, utterly supreme over all things, or over all known and unknown dimensions.

[3:37] He is ruler, creator, whose strength knows no end, whose wisdom knows no fathoming, whose understanding is beyond our comprehension, who is infinite and perfect in every aspect of his being morally pure.

That his holiness shines with a greater intensity than even a thousand suns. This is the God who is speaking, who they are encountering, and who is saying to them, do not be afraid.

And yet there is some element of fear before this God. Who can stand before such a one? No one. I think it was Phil who pointed out that as Moses stood before the burning bush, the miracle was not so much that the bush was not consumed, but that Moses was not consumed as he stood in the presence of this holy God, as he stood on holy ground.

And the reason I kind of want to sort of hover over verse 20 is that I think it puts a healthy check on our spirit.

[4:45] That though we rightly run to him, we've been singing of his goodness, we rightly run to him in full confidence because of the finished work of Jesus on the cross and all that he established for us.

We run in full confidence before him as his children in prayer and worship in the everyday stuff of life as we seek him and his help. He is at the one and the same time also the almighty God.

Not that, and forgive me for using this crass phraseology, but it gets the point. He is the almighty God, not the almighty God. Verse 20, don't be afraid.

Come with full confidence, but come also with a reverence, a reverent awe, humble and bold and confident.

That potent mixture that I think helps us just as we think about the God whom we worship, who we love. And many have tried to capture that, and you know I'm going to quote C.S. Lewis on this because it kind of epitomizes just what we're talking about here.

[5:56] And the lion and the witch and the warden will be new to some of you, but not to everyone. As the young Lucy is speaking with Mr. Beaver about, and she's about to meet Aslan, and he's explaining to her, he says, Aslan is a lion, the lion, the great lion.

Oh, she says, I thought he was a man. Is he quite safe? I shall feel rather nervous about meeting him. Safe, said Mr. Beaver.

Who said anything about safe? Of course he isn't safe, but he is good. He's the king, I tell you. But there are also other incidents in scripture where we see this kind of balance, if you like.

Joshua, if you remember, as he goes out into the battle, the angel of the Lord turns up. This is a sort of message translation, the calm Jack translation of the passage. Joshua says, Oh, phew. You are on our side, aren't you?

And the angel says, No, I'm not on your side. I'm not on either side. I'm on the Lord's side. Oh, yes, of course you are. He bows down in reverence and said, What is it the Lord would have for me?

[7:05] It's just a helpful check, isn't it? A helpful counterbalance in that statement in verse 20.

That when we pray, Lord, bless me, and which is right, that we pray that because we are blessed with every spiritual blessing in Christ Jesus.

But if the direction is always, Lord, bless me, bless me, bless me, that can become unhealthy, can't it? Bill, God then becomes our servant. Being afraid but not afraid helps keeps the balance.

Joshua got it, you know, when he was sort of seeking the Lord. Say, Are you going to bless me? He said, No, no. Yeah, you're right. I am the Lord's servant. And he bows down and says, What does the Lord want to say?

And as we look at verse 20, it feels like another of those sort of things that we often encounter in the Bible that we have to hold in tension, like God's sovereignty and human responsibility.

Or about prayer, why pray when God already knows what we're praying for? Or even the idea of presumption. I think we are to have a level of presumption because of the promises of God.

[8:14] And yet we have to be careful about over-presumption. I was reading, going through the Bible in a year, at the moment in Numbers, Numbers 14, the people moved on presumptuously without seeking the Lord and were defeated.

So you hold these things in tension, but in that tension, there's a healthy kind of balance, isn't there? But why is it important, don't be afraid but be afraid?

Well, Moses gives the application, verse 20. Do not be afraid. God has come to test you so that the fear of God will do what? He'll keep you from sinning. Now, if you're new to looking at the Bible, that might sound very negative.

I mean, sinning in some parts of modern culture is a positive, it's a good thing. That's where all the fun is happening. That sounds real old school negativity. But actually, verse 20 is in itself hugely positive when we realize that our sin, in the end, is actually the thing that is making our lives miserable and from which we need to be set free and for which Christ has come to set us free so that we might live rejoicing in Him.

So let me ask, what might don't be afraid but be afraid look like for you and I this week?

[9:40] What might it mean to have a little bit more reverence in our walk with the Lord? A form of this that does not paralyze but at the same time does not give us permission to sin so willfully as we might be willing to do.

How does it help us to be holy, changed and a changing people following a holy God? A holy God. Maybe that's something that we can bring to the table this morning as we reflect on the cross and what we've received in Christ.

So we worship then a holy God and are called to be a holy, changed and changing people. Now the people of God were learning that it was not just what God had saved them from that was important as they sought to be His holy people but also what He had saved them for to be this new creation. that He was forming. Let me unpack that a little further. What I mean by new creation. When we looked at the first couple ever made in the early chapters of Genesis when we did that, when we looked at Adam and Eve, we saw that they were made for a close and deep personal relationship, yes, with each other but also individually and together with the Lord and in that sort of triangle of relationship as we walk closer with the Lord as hopefully we'll discover in these marriage seminars that we're going to be looking at as we're closer to the Lord, the closer we come together in our relationship.

But we also saw that when they sinned, the universe that God had created, formed and filled began to de-create so that there was death in the world so that animals were no longer lying in peace with one another and that by the time the flood had come, the waters that had covered the earth in Genesis 1 were re-covering the earth in this de-creation of what God had made after the fall.

[11:46] And so what we see patterned in the Bible is God recreating what had fallen, renewing what had been destroyed, bringing a sort of new creation from that which had been de-created, restoring those vertical and horizontal lines of love for God and love for neighbor that were there in the beginning.

And we see that pattern when we see that idea of God restoring what had been de-created, getting a new creation, a new people. We begin to see it patterned each time that God kind of renews a covenant with his people as they repent and turn to him, but ultimately fulfilled in the New Testament.

And it's interesting in our culture, I think it's well documented now, that there is a returning to God in Western societies. Returning to church. And I think part of why people are doing that is because it does feel like Western society is the de-creating itself, choosing to dismantle the old Judeo-Christian worldview on which it was built that helped us understand who we are in regard to family and community and creation and nations and our identity and our gender and morality and so on.

And even the atheists whose derision of the Christian faith was responsible in part for this deconstructing, de-creating in our society are now running back to that old Judeo-Christian worldview, hands held up in horror, what they had ended up creating.

Running back to Christianity because of its moral values. Like Richard Dawkins now calls himself, bizarrely, a cultural Christian. But others have gone further who were the new atheists that we talked about in the past.

[13:43] Dawkins' former disciple, Ayaan Hershey Ali, who's actually become a Christian. Saying, I just, the atheistic world, you did not satisfy, it did not cohere with reality and I find in Christ and in Christianity something that made much more sense about the world in which we find ourselves.

Which is wonderful. And what I hope that we're seeing in all these Old Testament passages and some of them are difficult to get our heads around, especially if we're new to it all, but even if we aren't, that they are pointing to something bigger.

That they are pointing for a pattern for us of things that ultimately look forward of how they will be fully and beautifully fulfilled in Christ.

That's why Paul says, 2 Corinthians 10, 6, these things occurred in the Old Testament as examples to us from setting our hearts on the evil things that they did.

These things were given as examples, as patterns to help us as New Testament believers understand how to live these change and changing lives that God has given to us.

[14:54] But maybe when we read through, for example, if you read through the Bible in a year or two years or five years or whatever plan it is that we're doing and we come across these difficult passages in the Old Testament, it's tempting to just avoid them or even to read them or have them read for us, whether it's David Suchet or whoever, the Bible app that you're using, and kind of tune out and think, oh, this doesn't really apply to me.

But actually, I think one of the wonderful things that we're finding in our community groups as we wrestle with these passages is that they are lead to surprisingly good and helpful conversations.

This may be a ridiculous thing to say as a pastor, but it brings me great joy when I hear folks kind of feeding back from their community groups and hustling that wrestling with the passages, just how it's generating really helpful conversation as those who are maybe longer in the faith help those who are younger.

But I bet that those who are younger in the faith were just kind of real fresh questions that they come to the passage with really open up the passage and the discussion as well as they dig around the passage.

Well, what are some of the things that will have come up as we've discussed this and as we look at it? Well, firstly, I think as we approach these kind of passages, whether it's in our personal Bible reading or it's in a community group or on a Sunday morning, is to be aware that we come with certain things in our mind.

[16 : 23] One of them is a cultural elitism. We assume or we come with the assumption that our culture and so on is the apex of human civilization and so we look back down our noses at the past from a great high place and say, oh, how these things were awful.

But here's the thing. If the world is spared another three and a half thousand years, which is the time frame between now and these things happening in the past, if the world is spared another three and a half thousand years, those who come after us, our descendants will look back at our time and think, oh, how awful.

I can't believe that they ever thought like that. How could they ever make such laws? So we've got to be aware that we come with a cultural elitism. We also need to come aware that there's a specific context, that these laws were given three and a half thousand years ago in a very different time, a very different culture, in an agrarian society, in which things where the nations around it were very different and the values that they held.

And so actually, what we discover is that these values are incredibly enlightened in comparison with the nations around. There's a lot more mercy, there's a lot more grace, there's a lot more kindness. So actually, as we come to these passages, even just in our heart attitude, I think we need to be humble when we're looking at them. So we need to think, realize our sort of elitism, we need to think about the context, we also need to look at the purpose.

[17 : 54] What is the big picture of what's going on here? Well, the reformers talked about the triplex uses legis, three marks in the systematics exam. The three uses of the law.

We talked about two of them last week, that the law was given to convict of sin, but also, secondly, or thirdly, to cultivate new life in the believer. But actually, there's one that goes in the middle, and that is that the purpose of the law also is to constrain evil.

So it convicts of sin, it constrains, it stops us from entering into sin also. It holds us back as individuals and as societies, as well as cultivating new life in the believer.

So as we move on into the laws beyond the Ten Commandments, is that second, that constraining evil that I want to focus on. The laws then, as in our own day, they restrain us, don't they?

The speeding laws are meant to restrain us from speeding. They're meant to help us live as a sort of coherent society, to hold us back from that which decreates, that which destroys the fabric of the created order.

[19 : 16] I think also in the laws as we look at them, there is a measure, and I don't want to push this too hard because it can be unhelpful to push it too hard, but there's a measure of accommodation. You see that in the tension that Jesus talks about when he talks about divorce in Matthew 19.8.

God clearly hates it, but he's given it. Why? And Jesus says, well, it's because of the hardness of hearts of the things of God because of sin. I mentioned earlier about the community groups, and I'd heard that Emily Crutchley led our community group Bible study really well, so I said, look, are you going to give me your notes?

Because I heard it was really helpful. And she helpfully started by asking, actually, what mistakes did the Pharisees, the experts in the law, make when they tried to interpret these very laws that we're looking at?

Well, hear what it says, what Jesus says of them. Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites. You give a tenth of your spices, your mint, your dill, and cumin, but you have neglected the important matters of the law, justice and mercy and faithfulness.

You should have practiced the latter without neglecting the former. You blind guides, you strain out a gnat but swallow a camel. So they were interpreting according to the letter, totally ignoring the

spirit of the law.

[20 : 37] And they ended up, as Jesus says, straining out gnats and swallowing camels, taking a speck out of the eyes of others whilst ignoring the plank in their own and so on. So behind the specific laws at the specific time, I think there is the spirit of the law and there is this sort of general question which again, Emily brought up to the group that is helpful to ask for us as we look at these passages when we come across them in our quiet time, in our Bible studies and whatever on a Sunday morning.

What does God's law at that time tell us about God at all times and what he wants in our time?

That's good, isn't it? What does God's, I can say that because I didn't come up with it.

What does God's law at that time tell us about God at all times and what he wants in our time? Now of course, when we look at that and we think in those kind of terms, it's going to help us with the very purpose of which we're sort of looking at this passage, thinking about a holy God and what it means to be a holy, changed and changing people.

So we look at the laws, chapter, more specifically, I'll just go through them, chapter 21, verse 2, laws about slaves or servants, most uncomfortable for us to kind of look at. It's a different era, of course.

But actually, what's going on is the principles were provided more rights and protections for those in that, who were caught up in these things and the nations around.

[22 : 07] But also, as we'll see as we go through the scriptures, it plants the seeds that lead to the end of slavery. Verse 26, there are things about masters and households or the boss and how they treat their workers and offers the workers more protections.

See, the God of order and justice expects order and justice to be upheld in the workplace towards all God's image bearers, all humanity.

And there, in verse 12, there's things about culpability. Not, there's no culpability for accidental damage, but if the person has been neglectful and there's some injury, then yes, they are culpable. There's need for compensation. But also, there's an intent saying you need to prevent it. There's a restraining of wrongdoing, isn't there? And all of these laws and commands, they're really working of the Ten Commandments, aren't they?

Of love for God and love for neighbor. They're the inside, if you like, that we talked about of the outside sort of ten, visible ten laws. They're the deeper application of these commandments, of the Ten Commandments.

[23 : 22] So you see that again in chapter 23, the Sabbath, verse 10. The land gets a Sabbath as well as the people of God every seven years. And of course, that would be rotating around the area and that would mean also, as that is done, there's provision for the poor.

They would be able to glean that year's, olives and grapes and grains. But of course, for the other years, if you read on, there would be harvest gleaning rules in the other six years as we see in the story of Ruth.

There's verse 12, a day off for workers. Now, time doesn't allow me to go into details, which is, I guess, part of the advantage of the way that we do things because we look at the passages in community group first.

It gives us two runs at the passages so I don't always have to cover everything on a Sunday. But step back, keep stepping back and see what God is doing as he introduces these laws.

He's trying to restore what was lost. He's trying to bring new creation in that which has been decreed. He's trying to bring a super abundant love of God and love for neighbor to recreate, newly create that which was decreed all around.

[24 : 38] Restoring justice, restoring families, restoring speech, restoring the fabric of society. Tim Chester puts it this way. In Exodus 20, God has led his people to Mount Sinai to give them his law.

Here he creates his people as his people and through his law he orders or reorders them. The word justice or judgment were not just legal term. It also had the sense that God is creating the blueprint for his new creation through the law or restoring everything to its proper place.

God is creating the blueprint for his new creation through the law of his recreated people. In particular, the law symbolizes their ordering of creation.

The separation of light and darkness, water and water, water and land, the day and the night as we saw in creation in Genesis 1, 3 to 19 where God formed and filled the land.

That is replicated in these laws. Animals that span the separation of earth and land are unclean. Animals with both scales and feet or aquatic animals without scales are unclean.

[25 : 52] Mixtures of cloth are unclean. Leviticus 19, 19. This is also why anyone who has sexual relations with an animal is put to death, Exodus 22, 19. They are transgressing the boundaries separating an ordered creation.

The life-giving and death are separated. So birds that feed on carrion are unclean. Things that are defective are unclean. A goat that has been cooked in its mother's milk because what gives life should not bring death, Exodus 23, 19.

These distinctions are symbolic but their symbolism is important, isn't it? As they kind of reflect what is in Genesis chapter 1 when the creation was made then subsequent to its decreation he is recreating in his people how things were meant to be.

And these laws are then a testimony to the work that Christ will do of reordering the cosmos jumbled by sin of how and also ultimately in God's new world everything will be made new.

So these laws are then truly fulfilled not in precepts like they are here but ultimately in a person Jesus Christ and the call of all the scriptures is to receive him following follow him and let his indwelling presence by his indwelling spirit of holiness transform us because his Hebrew writer tells us Hebrews 12 for without holiness no one will see the Lord.

[27 : 30] Augustine all those years ago noticing another interesting parallel between those events in Exodus and the events in Pentecost in Acts when the spirit empowers the people of God.

He notes how Israel came to Sinai 50 days after offering the Passover lamb. The spirit came at Pentecost 50 days after Jesus the lamb of God was offered as the Passover lamb.

Both events involved a kind of something violent a violent shaking or a violent wind. Both involved fire. Both involved God writing his law.

The difference is that the fire at Pentecost was intimate and personal. His law was no longer written on tablets of stone but on the hearts of believers as he promised in Jeremiah.

And as we receive these things different from Exodus when we are no longer confronted by God's power but rather indwelt by it what we see in the shadows in Exodus we are experiencing in reality in Jesus Christ.

[28 : 45] Now that we have received this new covenant this greater covenant made with greater promises brought by the greater Moses Jesus Christ the same God who shook the mountain and shakes the nations actually is at work where?

In you and in me as well as in the world in which we live. a holy God calling for a holy people set free in Christ to be set free from sin.

I don't know if you ever wonder how these passages were preached in times gone by. What did other preachers preach about this passage on and how did they preach about it?

Well actually Hebrews chapter 12 is a sermon if you like on these very passages. you want to turn to it with me. Hebrews 12 verse 18 The preacher the writer to the Hebrews says you have not come to a mountain that can be touched and that is burning with fire to darkness gloom and storm to a trumpet blast or to such a voice speaking words that those who heard it begged that no further word be spoken to them because they could not bear what was commanded if even an animal touches the mountain it must be stoned to death.

The sight was so terrifying that Moses said I'm trembling with fear that's Exodus 19 and 20 isn't it? That's what we've been reading about in these last weeks. And the clue to kind of the context and what the preacher is writing and speaking into and some of the issues in verse 15 there's a root of bitterness that leads to verse 25 a rejection ultimately of God's voice.

[30 : 41] So he says verse 22 but you you have come to Mount Zion to the city of the living gods the heavenly Jerusalem you have come to thousands upon thousands of angels in joyful assembly to the church of the firstborn again Exodus imagery whose names are written in heaven you have come to God the judge of all to the spirits of the righteous made perfect to Jesus the mediator of the new covenant and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel verse 25 see to it that you do not refuse him who speaks if they did not escape when they refused him who warned them on earth how much less will we if we turn away from him who warns us from heaven at that time his voice shook the earth but how he has but now he has promised once more I will shake not only the earth but also the heavens the word once more indicates the removing of what can be shaken that is created things so that what cannot be shaken may remain therefore says the preacher since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken let's be thankful and so worship

God acceptably with reverence and awe for our God is a consuming fire that's how the ancient that's how the apostles preached on this passage that's how they picked up on that verse 20 fear but don't fear to keep you from sinning it's the antidote to the troubles! that they were experiencing in that context we see them in verse 14 he says make every effort to live in peace with everyone and to be holy for without holiness no one can see the Lord see to it that no one falls short of the grace of God and that no bitter root grows up to cause trouble and defile many see that no one is sexually immoral or is godless like Esau who for a single meal sold his inheritance rights as the oldest son afterwards as you know when he wanted to inherit this blessing he was rejected even though he sought the blessing with tears he could not change what had been done there's a solemnity to those words isn't there which we need to pause and notice because and also notice how it takes us right back to Exodus to chapter 20 and those those words to not be afraid but to be afraid to have a reverent fear to enable us and to help us to keep us from sinning so that we might live the changed life that we're called to live to live as a holy people before a holy God and as we think about these things if you know your own hearts you might be disheartened and think

I know my struggles I know where I am with the Lord I know the things that I've done so what is our confidence then as we come to these words where do we get the power for all of these things to live this change and changing life well chapter 20 verse 19 we see that in Exodus Moses was to be the mediator the people said don't let us go anywhere near God speak for us and we'll listen to you and so he verse 21 entered into the thick darkness whilst they remained at a distance but in Hebrews we are told that Jesus is our mediator he is the one who for us entered the thick darkness of our condemnation on the cross so that we could be brought stay at a distance absolutely no way so that we could be brought near so that he could establish for us a new covenant built on better promises a new law of the spirit as we read in Romans chapter 8 a new and a living way for you and me a new life of life and liberty with and for the Lord are you hearing are you experiencing that the Holy Spirit kind of drawing you saying there's more for you there's more for you hear the gracious invitation of the Lord that even in the circumstance we are facing whether that's in the depths or in real struggle he's saying to you and I invite me in invite me in and find me to be more than you know discover more of who I am and who you are and who you can be in me so let's come friends this morning to the table let's do business in our hearts with the Lord reflecting on these things experiencing the challenge and the encouragement of these words at this a new year a new chapter an invitation to a new depth of consecration and commitment to the Lord so come let's gather around the table together and as we gather around the table remember that this is the Lord's table and all those who truly love him and are invited to come and participate in it but if for whatever reason maybe you feel you're not a Christian yet or for whatever other reason you might think you know what

I'm just not going to participate this morning that's fine just pass on the elements as they're passed around nobody will probably notice or mind but as we come to the table let's pray God our Father as we reflect on that passage this morning we're so conscious of how privileged we are that you the great God of heaven would redeem us would die for us so that we could live in you and for you and with you now and forever and so Lord as we come to this table as we set aside these very ordinary items for this holy use and mystery we ask that we'd be very conscious of your presence continue to be conscious of your presence here and now and as we come to the foot of the cross as we're reminded of all that you have done for us

[37 : 19] Lord you'd speak into our hearts the things that we need to hear that's encouragement then would it be encouragement as you speak of your great redeeming love if it is conviction conviction of things that are just not right in our life that are in which we are entangling ourselves making ourselves miserable because of sin Lord would you convict us and lead us to repentance and freedom from these things but Lord as we watch on and we're not yet Christians and we're thinking you know what I think I want to become a Christian Lord may we be converted to faith in Jesus Christ and the new and living life the living way that he has for us so Lord as we come we ask for your blessing on these things in Jesus name Amen well the night that Jesus was betrayed we remember that he took the bread that he broke it and he said this is my body it was broken for you in the same way also he took the cup the third cup which was the cup of salvation at the meal and he said this cup well it represents the new covenant the new covenant that is going to be established in my blood for you so the apostle Paul rightly reminds us that as often as we eat this bread as we drink this wine we remember we savour we apply the Lord's death to our lives until he

comes to take us home which is saying

Maranatha come Lord Jesus but till that day come eat drink and remember and and and and and
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