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**Session 8**

***God of Freedom,* Week 5a**

**Exodus 20:22 – 23:9**

**6-7 November 2023**

**A Word of Caution – The “Book of the Covenant” is the extended expression of the Ten Commandments, i.e. it is the interpretation of the Ten Commandments into the specific context of the original audience.** The Ten Commandments transcend *all* times and *all* contexts, but the Book of the Covenant does not. It is meant for a specific time and a specific context. Some of what the Book of the Covenant says will sound very strange to us in our day and in our culture, so we must ask ourselves what presuppositions we are bringing to it. When we find ourselves asking, “If this [command] is in the Bible, is God really good?” then we need to reframe our question. Why? Because we *KNOW* that God *IS* good. So when we read something that makes us question His goodness, the problem is *not* with His goodness but with our understanding of how these particular words are a reflection of the goodness of God. What we are almost always missing in such cases is some context piece.

**The Structure of the Book of the Covenant –** The Book has a prologue, followed by a section of judgments and then an epilogue. In contrast to what they had experienced in Egypt, God gave them a *written* account of His law code, which Moses read to them. (No records of Egyptian law from this time period have survived, so the people living there may have had very little actual knowledge of the “laws of the land”. But God wants His people to be very aware of what He requires of them. So this in and of itself shows the goodness of God in His dealings with His people: He is forthright and lets them know up front what the requirements for holy living are.

**Its Intended Use –** The law codes that were given to the Israelites were not intended for individuals to practice. Rather, they were given to the *judges* that Moses had appointed, to guide them in rendering judgments in the cases that were brought before them. In other words, the Book of the Covenant was intended to be used in a court of law, a trial setting.

**Altars –** God did NOT want altars that resembled those used in pagan worship: His altars were to have no steps and they were not to be of “human” origin in that they were to built of unhewn field stones. (This is in direct contrast to the ziggurats of the time.) Also note that these altars were *temporary* structures, meant to be used until the Tabernacle was constructed.

**Laws Regarding Slaves –** The word translated “slave” throughout the Book of the Covenant does NOT refer to the kind of slavery that we are familiar with in our own history. In fact, we see in Exodus 21:16 that God condemns that kind of slavery: “Whoever steals a man and sells him, AND whoever is found in possession of him, shall be put to death.” What is being addressed in the Book of the Covenant is a form of servitude that someone *willingly* enters into in order to pay off a debt, so that he and his family will not starve.

**Why Start with Slavery? –** Why would a law code begin with the topic of how to treat slaves? Because the Israelites had just been released from slavery in Egypt! They needed to know how God expected them to treat people under their power. In other words, God has gotten them out of Egypt, and now He wants to get Egyptian practices out of them! Consider the contrasts of what they had known to what God expects of them now:

* Slavery in Egypt was involuntary.
* There was no end to the bondage.
* They worked in work gangs which gave them no individuality in the eyes of their oppressors, i.e. they were just an anonymous, depersonalized mass.
* Pharoah had the power of life and death over them.
* Property rights of slaves were minimal (if they existed at all) and conditional, since all land in

Egypt ultimately belonged to the crown.

* There was no sabbath rest (which meant that there was also no opportunity for regular worship).

But God said, “It shall not be like that among the people of God.” So what He arranges is this:

* There can be debt servitude for a limited period of time.
* This servitude is entered into willingly, albeit as a last measure of resort.
* It is a way for a Hebrew to help another Hebrew.
* It is a way to love to our neighbor as ourselves and to show preferential love.
* It is relational.
* It is for the purpose of compensation and care.
* Cruelty, harshness and ruthlessness are forbidden.
* The intent is to restore dignity and agency versus removing them.

The assumption is that the relationship between such a servant and his master could—and *should*—be so positive that some would not want to leave their situation even if the opportunity to do so were to arise! So God does show His goodness in this law code by placing guidelines for how to treat slaves at the very beginning of it—in strong contrast to the Code of Hammurabi, which placed laws governing the treatment of slaves at the very end.

**Set Before Them –** “Now these are the rules that you shall set before them.” Note that the people are to have access to the law code. It is not to be kept hidden from them. They are to know exactly what they are dealing with. The first rule is that such a servant is to be released after six years *whether his debt has been paid in full or not!*

**What About a Slave’s Wife and Children –** Then we come to a rule that seems very unjust to us at first glance. If a man is given a wife by his master and she bears him children, he cannot take any of them with him when his six years are up. Why would that be? It is actually a form of protection for his family if he does not do well in the future. What if his crops fail and he can’t support them? That would be bad for the community as a whole. Note that the law does NOT say that he can never see his wife and his

children again; it just says that the risk will be born by the community and not fall on him alone. And the next part of the law says that he can *willingly* serve this master for *compensation* for the rest of his life, if he so chooses.

**A Daughter Sold into Servanthood –** This next section of the law also contains statements that are difficult for us to understand initially. But we will see that they are intended to give women protection and status that other cultures of the day did not. A daughter sold into servanthood was to put into a safer environment than men had. She wasn’t to be forced to go out and work in the fields where she might be in danger. If she becomes a wife to her master, she is to be treated with the full rights of a wife. Note that this is an *acknowledgment* of the practice of polygamy—but not a *blessing* of it! This law tells a man that he can’t treat a slave-wife as second rate goods. He has to treat her as if she is the only wife that he has. Such a law sets limits that may well give a man pause before he takes on the financial burden of multiple wives. There would have been a similar provision for sons sold into servanthood, but this law dealing with daughters makes it very clear that the Israelites were not to be like the nations around them; women count in their community.

**Is This God’s Ideal? –** Sometimes reading laws like this is troubling to us, and we wonder why God didn’t just forbid slavery altogether. But think about how Jesus lived in the culture of His day. He didn’t overturn the Roman government like His disciples wanted Him to, even though it was very corrupt and oppressive. Someday Jesus will return and WILL make all things right, “right now!”—but in the meantime, He wants us to live in shining contrast to the evil and oppression around us. He has His own timetable—and He shows us how to be holy even when the system we live in is not. He is allowing the consequences of sin; He is allowing a broken system to play its course, and He will be glorified through it. So some of the laws in the Book of the Covenant deal with less than ideal arrangements in the most humane ways possible.

***Parallels to 1 Peter***

*1. The first parallel is found in phrases found in 1 Peter 1:14-18, i.e. “do not be conformed to the passions of your* ***former ignorance****,” “ conduct yourselves with fear throughout* ***the time of your exile*** *(i.e. less than ideal circumstances), and “the* ***futile ways*** *inherited from your forefathers.” Peter wants his hearers to leave their previous way of life behind and to live holy lives patterned after Christ’s.*

*2. The second is found in Peter’s advice to servants in 2:18-23. Keep in mind that the “servants” of Peter’s day were much more similar to the bad form of slavery the Israelites had experienced in Egypt than to the “good” form of indentured servanthood that the Book of the Covenant addresses. Yet Peter does not urge servants to rise up in rebellion, but to remain in respectful submission to their masters, following the example of Christ, who entrusted Himself to the One “who judges justly.” Once again, the circumstances are less than ideal, but God expects us to live holy lives in the midst of those circumstances and to trust Him to deal with an unjust system in His own time and way.*

*3. The third parallel is found in Peter’s advice to husbands in 3:7, telling them to live with their wives “in an understanding way,* ***showing honor to the woman****…since they are heirs with you of the grace of life…”*