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Exodus 22:18-27

Forty-sixth Message

Brian Morgan

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BECAUSE YOU WERE STRANGERS IN A STRANGE LAND

SERIES: CREATING COMMUNITIES OF SHALOM IN DAILY LIFE

We had the pleasure of having one of our missionary statesmen, Eli Fangidae, at our elders meeting last week. Eli shared with us some of his latest visions for training the next generation of pastors in Indonesia. I'm always amazed by missionaries like Eli and Gus Marwih. Despite their age, they have an undying zeal for God's glory and for his people, a zeal puts most of us to shame. I've often wondered why some Christians seem so highly motivated they can't do enough to serve their King, while others who have the same faith seem to limp along in a fog. What makes these individuals burn on the inside and glow on the outside? The answer is vital, for as we journey through the Book of the Covenant, it is of little value to know God's ethical "ways" for building communities if we lack motivation. What is it that sparks motivation to have compassion for others?

We now come to a series of four sets of laws that alternate between preserving one's covenant relationship with the Lord with that of our neighbor.

a Threats to our covenant relationship with God (22:18-20)

b Protecting the poor from financial exploitation (22:21-27)

a' Giving full honor to God (22:28-31)

b' Honest and impartial speech within the community (23:1-9)

Once again, the arrangement of the material highlights God's chief concern that there should be absolutely no division between Israel's worship and her ethics, between loving God and loving one's neighbor. But what I find most intriguing about this material is the motivation that is to be the impetus for these behaviors. The primary motive that unifies these laws is found in the repeated statement "you were strangers in the land of Egypt" (22:21; 23:9). Its repetition serves as an inclusio framing these laws in the memory of Israel's own story. If we understand the significance of this phrase in relation to these laws, we will perhaps be a step closer to unlocking the secret of motivation to loving God and our neighbor.

We will look at the first two sets of these laws; then we will have the privilege of listening to the testimony of one our leaders who has discovered untold joy in carrying out these guidelines.

I. Death Sentences Upon Life Threats Exodus 22:18-20

You shall not allow a sorceress to live. Whoever lies with an animal shall surely be put to death. He who sacrifices to any god, other than to the LORD alone, shall be utterly destroyed. (Exod 22:18-20 NASB)

These three laws all speak of practices that posed a grave threat to Israel's covenant relationship with God. If these were not ruthlessly dealt with and utterly eradicated, they could infect and spread like a cancer, ravaging Israel's soul. These included sorcery (the practice of the occult and magical arts), bestiality, and idolatry. All three were commonly practiced in the land and had become an integral part of Canaanite worship (Deut 18:14; Lev 20:6, 15, 23). As Stuart suggests, "The problem with these practices is not merely the abhorrent de-

parture from decency they represent: their greater offense is in their attempt to substitute something in the place of the saving practices of Yahweh's covenant.¹⁷

Sorcery cultivates techniques designed as "an attempt to manage and manipulate power that truly belongs only to God."² It is the illicit reach to grasp spiritual forces to manipulate them for one's own ends, bypassing a submissive relationship to the Creator God and all morality. Sorcery is "playing God" at the highest level, and its practice led Israel astray from their pure trust in Yahweh. It is condemned throughout the Old and New Testaments (Deut 18:9-14; Jer 27:9-10; Micah 5:12; Acts 8:9-24; 13:6-11; Gal 5:19-20; Rev 18:23). Sorcery is still practiced today. A missionary in France once told me that there are more mediums in Paris than evangelical pastors. Our nation is not immune to their influence.

The New Testament term for sorcery, *pharmakeia*, refers not only to manipulation through magic and the casting of spells, but also manipulation through the use of drugs. It is not hard to imagine that had God spoken these laws to our modern world, he might very well have substituted "drug pusher" for "sorceress." Drug use among our nation's youth is staggering. In 2001, almost 5% of young adults reported using crack cocaine at least once during their lifetimes. Among high school seniors during the same year, 8.2% admitted to using cocaine. Nearly half of all drug emergency room visits are due to cocaine abuse.³ Some countries treat the potential threat of illegal drugs with equal severity as Israel's laws. When traveling to Singapore and Malaysia several years ago, I was stunned by the severe warning stamped into their passports that read, "The possession or sale of all drugs will result in death!"

Bestiality was an accepted practice in Canaanite religion (Lev 18:23-24). Baal, the chief god of rain and fertility, is depicted in their myths as having sex with animals. David Roper writes,

Baal is the great storm god who drives the clouds across the sky and lets his voice be heard in the crash of thunder. In violent conflict he drives off Mot the god of the dry season, and brings rain and fertility to the land. . . Before Baal descends into the earth, however, he . . .

Makes love to a heifer in Debir,
A young cow in the fields of Shimmt.
He lies with her seventy-seven times—
(Yea, he copulates) eighty-eight times—
So that she conceives
And bears a child. (67:V;18:22)

By this last act Baal ensures that fertility will not entirely perish from the earth during his absence.⁴

Such despicable acts were ritually imitated by priests and female worshippers. Because these practices filled the land, God had to relentlessly warn his people not to defile themselves like the Canaanites, who knew no sexual boundaries (Lev 18:23-24).

The crime of idolatry, which is described here as “sacrificing to other gods,” was a direct violation of the second commandment. Israel’s God is not one deity among many. No, he is the sovereign Lord alone, a jealous God who tolerates no rivals. Therefore “whoever sacrifices to another must be destroyed.”

The severity of these crimes arose from the fact that all three threatened the salvation that God was offering Israel, by undermining, corrupting and polluting Israel’s faith in the Lord God alone. To participate in such practices was the ultimate breach of one’s covenantal relationship with God.

We can see the disastrous consequences illustrated in the life of King Saul. Saul sacrificed to the Lord however he pleased (1 Sam 13:9; 13-14), and after his long-standing disobedience resorted to sorcery in his final act as Israel’s defiant king. In the battle to overcome his arch rival David he found himself void of power and life as the Spirit of God had departed from him. With no spiritual immune system he became subject to an evil spirit that terrorized him (1 Sam 16:14). But rather than repenting and facing the consequences of his sin, Saul strengthened his resolve to be master of his own destiny. With the army of the Philistines looming on the horizon, he disguised his identity and went to a medium by night to inquire if she might possibly be able to conjure Samuel from the grave, so as to get a reading on the outcome of the battle. To Saul’s shame, the medium appears more sensitive to the holy demands of Israel’s God than the king:

But the woman said to him, “Behold, you know what Saul has done, how he has cut off those who are mediums and spiritists from the land. Why are you then laying a snare for my life to bring about my death?” (1 Sam 28:9)

To calm her fears, Saul vows that her life will be preserved. This is the lowest point in Saul’s life, for by this act of worship he has fully aligned himself with all that is evil, in direct opposition to all that is good and holy. The only vow that Saul keeps in the books of Samuel is the one he makes to a medium. Ironically, Saul’s vow preserves the life of the medium, while destroying his own. In one day’s time, after being wounded by a Philistine arrow, he committed suicide by falling on his own sword. When the Philistines discovered Saul’s corpse, they decapitated him and impaled his body to the wall of Beth-shan. Saul’s life ends in ignominy. Israel’s first king is given over to the same fate as the idol worshipper and blasphemer, Goliath. Tragically, the consequences of the king’s idolatry spread to the entire nation, as countless innocent lives were lost in defense of their erring king, including that of one of Israel’s most faithful warrior sons, Jonathan.

In the new covenant community we find a zero tolerance for sorcery, sexual perversion and idolatry as they continue to pose serious threats to our covenant relationship with God. Jesus warned that such stumbling blocks would inevitably be present in every generation, but for the one responsible, the consequences were unimaginable:

“Whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in Me to stumble, it would be better for him to have a heavy millstone hung around his neck, and to be drowned in the depth of the sea.” (Matt 18:6)

But though the dangers remain the same, the work of the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ has elevated judgment to a higher and more effective level. Spiritual discipline replaces a physical death. Such discipline is an activity that goes on continually on different levels for all of us in the body of Christ. Because we are all in constant danger from the effects of sin we need to live in close

community with believers to be cleansed with a gentle, corrective word on a daily basis. This is what Jesus symbolized by washing the feet of the disciples and commanding them to do the same for one another (John 13:14-15). Discipline is as normative and natural as a daily shower.

When righteous correction goes unheeded and flagrant idolatry persists, however, the entire body is in danger. The final step in discipline is designed to cleanse the body of pollution by removing the unrepentant individual, while at the same time leaving the door open for the redemption of the sinner (James 5:19-20; Matt 18:15-18; 1 Tim 1:20; 1 Cor 5:11-13). Outside the protective custody of the Spirit, the individual, like Saul, becomes subject to evil forces that heretofore had no access to him. Though extreme, this measure is designed to bring the individual to his or her senses so that he or she might repent and come home. In the church of Corinth, when Paul delivered a young man over to Satan for having sexual relations with his mother, it was “for the destruction of his flesh, so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus” (1 Cor 5:5).

The glory of living in the New Covenant is that the blood of Christ actually cleanses and liberates us from every form of idolatry. If this were not true, then all discipline and exhortations to purity would be cruel and false:

“...neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor effeminate, nor homosexuals, nor thieves, nor the covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers, will inherit the kingdom of God. Such were some of you; but you were washed, but you were sanctified, but you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of our God.” (1 Cor 6:9-11)

Next, the text shifts its concern from things that threaten our covenant relationship with God, to those that threaten our covenant relationship with one another.

II. Care for the Disadvantaged Poor Exodus 22:21-27

A. Don’t Be Like Pharaoh (22:21-24)

You shall not wrong a stranger or oppress him, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt. You shall not afflict any widow or orphan. If you afflict him at all, and if he does cry out to Me, I will surely hear his cry; and My anger will be kindled, and I will kill you with the sword, and your wives shall become widows and your children fatherless. (Exod 22:21-24)

The law now deals with three classes of people in Israel that needed special care and protection because they were especially vulnerable to exploitation—foreigners, orphans, and widows. Foreigners lacked the protective rights of citizenship, making them vulnerable to political, social or economic exploitation, including unjust deportation. Widows and orphans were also exposed to endless social and economic oppression, because they had lost their male advocate to give them a protective covering and a voice in Israel’s legal system. Widows “could not even own land in their own names, under many conditions,”⁵ forcing them to a lifetime of labor to support themselves. Once they became too old to work they were left to the mercy of others if no one in their family intervened. Orphans, likewise, had no voice at the legal assembly and were equally dependent on the mercy of the community for their sustenance and nurture.

Using three different verbs (“wrong,” “oppress,” “afflict”) God emphatically warns Israel that the underprivileged are never to be taken advantage of. Such an emphasis reveals how tempting it is to

accumulate wealth at the expense of the weak, and how blind we can be to the needs of others when we find ourselves in a position of economic advantage. It is a very slippery slope, from operating in a position of economic advantage that could be considered legally “gray,” to harsh exploitation and oppression that robs the weak of their viability to live.

The motive that is to drive Israel’s ethics is the memory of her history: “for you were *strangers* in the land of Egypt.” This suggests that the memory of Israel’s oppression in Egypt was not something that was to be quickly erased and gladly forgotten, but forever preserved, for the memory of the past was designed to produce unceasing gratitude towards God for her freedom and a wellspring of compassion for the weak. Regarding the stranger, Israel was to call to mind that she too was once a stranger in a land of oppression. At the core of her being were vivid memories of what it was like to be marginalized and despised as a foreigner, to be afflicted beyond human dignity and to spend one’s days digging in the mud, muck and mire just to survive. Yet those tortuous centuries of slavery were not without a divine benefit. Having been rescued by God, Israel was to emerge as a people characterized by divine compassion for the stranger. What other culture had a tender heart that would embrace the stranger as one of their own?

In her book, *Metaphor and Memory*, Cynthia Ozick observes how the memory of the Exodus shaped Israel’s social ethics so differently from other nations: “The Romans originally had a single word, *hostis*, to signify both enemy and stranger. Nowhere beyond the reach of the Pentateuch did the alien and the home-born live under the same code; in early Roman law, every alien was classed as an enemy, devoid of rights. In Germanic law the alien was *rechtsunfähig*, a pariah with no access to justice. The Greeks make slaves of the stranger and then taunted him with barks.”⁶

This was the secret I learned about Eli Fangidae and Gus Marwieh, for this is one of the motivations that drives their compassion for the poor in Liberia and Indonesia. Several years ago, I had the privilege of entering in Eli’s world to see his work first hand. There wasn’t an impoverished child or orphan his heart didn’t want to adopt. At one point he took me to the village where he was born and, with a tear in his eye, recounted the memories of his poverty stricken childhood. Sixty years later, these memories are still transforming Eli’s world with more love than most of us can contain. The same is true for Gus Marwieh. Have you ever heard Gus pray for his people in war-torn Liberia or the refugee camps in Ghana? When he prays, the foundations of the building shake. Where does such passion come from? The answer is clear when you know that it is appreciation for the sovereign grace of God that liberated him from bondage to sin, alienation and suffering of his youth in Liberia. In the New Covenant community, Paul exhorts Christians with a similar motivation to remember our past:

“...remember that you were at that time separate from Christ, excluded from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who formerly were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ... So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints, and are of God’s household...” (Eph 2:12-13, 19)

Our glorious salvation in Christ should forever stamp us with an unending appreciation to God and a constant compassion toward others. For we were slaves of a far worse tyrant than Pharaoh, and

the cost to deliver us was more precious than the blood of a lamb. But now through the blood of Christ, we have been rescued from the devil and adopted into God’s family as full-fledged “sons.”

To further sharpen Israel’s memory, God continues to use the metaphors of Exodus language to describe the judgment he will execute upon Israel if she fails to uphold these commands. Just as God was moved by Israel’s cries and mobilized the forces of the entire creation to deconstruct Pharaoh’s world, so now, if God’s people become Pharaoh-like and oppress the disadvantaged poor, he will turn the tables on his people. The language of verse 23 is so emphatic it is chilling, as Brueggemann writes...

Verse 23 is of special interest because it is so emphatic, featuring three absolute infinitives in succession: “If you *truly oppress*...if they *truly cry out*...I will *truly hear*.” The sequence makes the most decisive appeal Israel can muster for obedience to covenantal ethics. The theological pivot of the exodus narrative is the conviction that God hears and is moved by such cries (cf. 2:23-25; 3:7-8). As the cry of Israel against Egypt mobilized Yahweh against the oppressive Egyptians, so now the cry of widows and orphans will mobilize Yahweh against oppressive Israel.⁷

When orphans and widows cry out to God in their affliction, God will mobilize his strength and destroy husbands and fathers by the sword, leaving Israel as helpless as the ones they oppressed. The wives and children of the oppressors will become the new generation of outcasts. As heirs of divine history we have not only the threat of God’s warning, but also the actual record of these terrible consequences carried out in the Assyrian invasions and Babylonian captivity. The orphan nation birthed by the compassion of God was destined to become a widow nation, because she “dismembered” her memory. As Fretheim asserts, “When the people of God mistreat the poor, they violate their own history. It is not simply a violation of the laws of God; more fundamentally, it is a disavowal of their own past, of those salvific acts which made them what they were.”⁸

On the other hand, when aliens, widows and orphans are embraced and welcomed into God’s kingdom, as in the book of Ruth, the darkest eras of nations and communities can be redeemed beyond measure. So the law exhorts Israel in their dealings with the poor: “Don’t be like Pharaoh; rather be like family.”

B. Be Like Family (22:24-27)

If you lend money to My people, to the poor among you, you are not to act as a creditor to him; you shall not charge him interest. If you ever take your neighbor’s cloak as a pledge, you are to return it to him before the sun sets, for that is his only covering; it is his cloak for his body. What else shall he sleep in? And it shall come about that when he cries out to Me, I will hear him, for I am gracious. (Exod 22:24-27)

God now gives three commands to further explicate exactly what he means by not oppressing the poor. The first two radically proclaim that Israel’s treatment of the poor was not to be governed by profit, but by covenant relationship. When the poor were in need of a loan, the transaction was not to be treated as an opportunity for profit, as with a business or a bank, but an opportunity to strengthen relational bonds, as one would within a family, therefore the loan was to be granted with no interest. The common expression, “It’s nothing personal, it’s just business,” is replaced by, “It’s not business, it’s extremely personal, for you are my brother!”

For the poor will never cease to be in the land; therefore I command you, saying, “You shall freely open your hand to your brother, to your needy and poor in your land.” (Deut 15:11)

When loans are given without interest, there is no ongoing leverage that keeps the debtor poor indefinitely. If your adult son or daughter had a car accident leaving them with major medical bills that threatened to make them homeless, you would not hesitate to give all you could to help meet their needs. No parent with an ounce of compassion would treat the misfortune of a son or daughter as an opportunity to advance his or her personal fortune. We must understand that economic solidarity does not make for the most profitable economies, but that is not the main purpose of God’s law. His laws are designed to establish loving communities, which means that the community bears the economic burdens of the poor collectively, as one family.

If a creditor insisted on security for his loan, the law made a provision, but it came with a twist. In normal lending transactions, collateral was given in exchange of a loan so that, if the borrower defaulted on the loan, the creditor was assured of some property to offset his loss. But as a poor man had no property to give in exchange for a loan, the creditor was allowed to take his cloak as collateral. The cloak consisted of several pieces of heavy fabric sewn together, which served as a durable outer garment by day and a warm blanket by night. Keeping a poor man’s cloak overnight would be like insisting on your right to keep a friend’s sleeping bag in your possession at night on a camping trip. How could you possibly sleep while your friend lay outdoors in the cold with no covering? Rather than jeopardize the life of the poor, God insisted that a creditor return his “cloak” at the end of every day.

If you play this out in your mind, the scene appears rather ludicrous. At the end of every work day the rich man takes the poor man’s cloak in hand, travels on foot or by animal to the poor man’s home, knocks on the door, greets the man or his wife, then drops off the cloak and makes his journey home, only to return the very next morning after sunup to retrieve his collateral. The act of retrieving and returning the cloak takes a significant portion of the rich man’s day. It doesn’t take much imagination to picture, in the endless repetition of this routine, the exchanges becoming a bit longer and more intimate. Greetings are prolonged as the rich man is invited into the home for a cup of Starbucks, and meets the man’s wife and children. Now when he returns home, he thinks more about the plight of the poor man than his own money. So he returns the next day with a pound of coffee as a gift, and so on, until with ever increasing empathy, the rich man refuses to take collateral, or even better, motivated by love, he forgives the loan altogether. When this final result has been achieved, the rich man’s heart has become like God’s. He is gracious (verse 27).

So the law was designed not only to protect the poor from exploitation, but perhaps this was God’s subversive way of creating strong bonds between the rich and poor. We can see this in the vocabulary God uses to describe the poor. First, they are called “my people,” and then “my people” becomes “your neighbor.” In God’s economy, financial transactions are extremely personal, as creditors are no longer viewed as potential sources of income, but as family to be loved. This is why Paul writes to Timothy to instruct the rich “to do good, to be rich in good works, to be generous and ready and to share” (1 Tim 6:18). It is not enough for the rich to give of their money, they must generously give of their time and of themselves to the poor. In this way they learn to love. So important was cultivating this spirit of generosity to the apostles in the early church, they set up deacons (Acts 6:1-6; 1 Tim 3:8-13) as an office to give ongoing care and assistance to orphans and widows.

Seven years ago, our elders felt we had been falling short of this Biblical mandate, and in response appointed deacons according to the guidelines of Acts 6 and 1 Tim 3. Under the leadership of Bill Harman, these servants have faithfully and sacrificially served the needy in our midst. To date they have ministered to over 1300 individuals and have averaged about twenty projects per month. Listening to Bill’s monthly reports on these projects, we elders have been amazed at how motivated and joyful these servants are to serve. So this morning I thought it would be appropriate for you to hear directly from Bill of the joy that this ministry brings to his heart, and to pray with us that the Lord will take the ministry to new levels.

For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, yet for your sake He became poor, so that you through His poverty might become rich. (2 Cor 8:9)

1 Douglas L. Stuart, *Exodus* (TNAC; Nashville, Tenn.: Broadman & Holman: 2006), 513.

2 Walter Brueggemann, “Exodus,” *The New Interpreter’s Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1994), 1:867.

3 Drug-Rehabs.org - <http://www.drug-rehabs.org/drug-statistics.php>

4 David Roper, “The Old Baal Game.” Special thanks to David Roper for these unpublished notes.

5 Stuart, *Exodus*, 517.

6 Cynthia Ozik, *Metaphor & Memory* (New York: Vintage Books, Random House, 1991), 280.

7 Brueggemann, “Exodus,” 1:868.

8 Terence Fretheim, *Exodus*, (Interpretation; Louisville: John Knox, 1991), 247.