

# THE PREREQUISITE TO HEALTHY RELATIONSHIPS

SERIES: *CREATING COMMUNITIES OF SHALOM IN DAILY LIFE*



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Exodus 20:18-21

Fortieth Message

Brian Morgan

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## Our World at War

We are a world at war. At no time since WW II, perhaps, have international tensions escalated to such a fever pitch that no country seems immune from the inflammatory rhetoric or actual violence. This summer our family took a vacation, hiking in the Swiss Alps. One week before we left, I read that Swiss officials had arrested dozens of suspects who allegedly conspired to shoot down an Israeli airliner flying from Geneva. Other intelligence reports concluded that once neutral Switzerland was becoming “a jihadi field of operation” for potential terrorists. While we were in Switzerland, hiking through green meadows beneath a panorama of glistening glaciers, I couldn’t help but feel the sting of what was occurring in Israel and Lebanon. Instead of a choir of cowbells echoing like church chimes across the canyons, thousands of innocent victims were awakening to the deafening explosions of rockets and mortar fire.

The violence is further fueled by inflammatory rhetoric that widens the gulf between nations and religions, so much so that there seems to be no end in sight. Even the Pope, who historically has been a calming voice for peace, was burned in effigy over his comments that Islam is a religion tainted by violence. Within our own nation, the six million Muslims who have made America their home feel more and more isolated and unwelcome by the national rhetoric to combat terrorism. Americans know well how to communicate our hard fought ideals of democracy and freedom, but perhaps we need more wisdom and humility on how to build bridges into other cultures different from our own.

## The Need for Communities of Shalom

The same could be said for the Church. We boldly raise the bright colors of our moral ideals high from our pulpits, but seem to have far less wisdom on how to create communities of *shalom* (“peace and well-being”) that reflect the character of the compassionate and holy God we serve. To outsiders looking in, there appears to be little integration between our worship and our everyday ethics. Two of my students at Western Seminary, just returned from several months of ministry in Iraq and Lebanon, shared that after months of living in these communities, the Muslim people were very open to listening to the gospel after the students had modeled genuine concern and sacrificial service among their people. Perhaps at this moment in history, when our world seems dangerously close to extinction, we need to recover the community life that God seeks to create with his covenant people. The times demand that we no longer neglect the purpose for which God has saved us – to be a people for his name among the nations (Acts 15:14).

## I. Introduction to the Book of the Covenant

To help us in this venture we will resume our studies in the book of Exodus, following God’s giving of the Ten Commandments to his people. This section, Exodus 21:1-23:19, known as the Book of Covenant (Exod 24:7), is a foundational text for Old Testament ethics. It reveals God’s first concerns for his people as they begin to shape themselves as a nation. These words are as vital to Israel’s identity as the Bill of Rights is to our nation. The “Book of Covenant” implies that Israel’s obedience to these laws will be the ultimate expression of her covenantal faithfulness to the Lord who rescued her from slavery in Egypt. And in their keeping she will be fulfilling the purpose for which God called her, namely to be “a kingdom of priests and a holy nation” (19:6) to the world around her.

While the Ten Commandments express God’s law in the ideal, these laws and ordinances give practical instruction on how to implement his rule in Israel’s social, economic and political context. They assume Israel does not live in a perfect world, and carefully point out where the chief points of contention will be and how to deal with them. In this material there is no naiveté regarding the deceitfulness of sin and its power to destroy communities. Janzen also suggests that these laws give a broader application than the Ten Commandments: “The Ten Commandments primarily address life in the extended family; the Book of the Covenant primarily focuses on the welfare of the clan or village. Thus the sampling of the new life under God is extended from Israel’s basic living unit, the extended family, to its next larger unity, the clan or village.”<sup>1</sup>

Some of you may be questioning the value of such a study and wondering what relevance these ancient laws have for the Church, since the Christian no longer lives under law. Unfortunately, this has been the dominant attitude throughout church history, from Marcion in the second century, who rejected the laws outright, to the present day, when few Christians even engage them in their thinking. Further hindering our thoughtful examination of this material are numerous examples of well meaning but naïve Christians who seek to implement them, with no sense of a completely transformed cultural or theological context, leaving untold damage in their wake.

I would suggest that as we meditate on how God sought to regulate the intimate ethical details of Israel’s life, we come face to face with God’s chief concerns that govern his heart for the creation of a holy community. Though the specific implementation of these laws will be different for the Church, the concerns of God’s heart remain the same and must not be neglected. God’s chief concern in all ages has been for his people to foster responsible and loving relationships wherever they go. Thus I have cho-

sen the title *Creating Communities of Shalom* for this series. I am using the Hebrew word *shalom* in its largest sense of “well-being” and “prosperity,” which brightens the soul when our relationships are sweetly harmonious and true.

For our purposes I would suggest that our “clan” or “village” is played out in our neighborhoods and schools. Contrary to the Silicon Valley mentality, we should never view our real estate merely as an investment to turn over for quick profit, but rather as our base of operations to establish the new Eden on earth. It is in the home that communities of *shalom* are birthed, and it is from the home that they are expanded. How we take our meals and open our doors in hospitality is critical to establishing God’s rule on earth.

From the home we must then consider the workplace. This is where we spend most of our hours, where we do business, and where we should be establishing significant relationships. It would be unthinkable to a true Israelite to view his work as a place for merely securing a paycheck; rather it was the place where the most significant relational transactions occurred. And the wages that he brought home were symbolic of the contribution he had made to the welfare of the community. The Book of the Covenant demands that we make no separation between the sacred and the secular in the way we live. God is intimately concerned about the smallest details of our lives, from how we worship to the way we conduct our business, from how we raise our children to the care we give to the elderly and the poor. I find it amazing that when we hear God’s voice from heaven, his first ethical concern is to preserve the dignity of slaves who are working off their financial debts (21:2-11). In our world, this would be equivalent to monitoring and caring for those who have become enslaved with credit card debt. This tells us that the accumulation of debt can be very destructive to community, as those who are weak become vulnerable prey to the powerful greedy; therefore debt needs to be regulated and monitored with great care.

Before we look at these issues in detail, our text (Exod 20:18-21) gives what I consider to be the pre-requisite attitude necessary before we can ever begin to cultivate healthy relationships in community. In these four verses we are given Israel’s response to *seeing* God’s glory and *hearing* his Ten Words from Mount Sinai. This sets forth an important transition from the Ten Commandments to the Book of the Covenant.

## II. The Response of His People Exod 20:18-21

**When the people saw the thunder and lightning and heard the trumpet and saw the mountain in smoke, they trembled with fear. They stayed at a distance and said to Moses, “Speak to us yourself and we will listen. But do not have God speak to us or we will die.” Moses said to the people, “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.” The people remained at a distance, while Moses approached the thick darkness where God was. (Exod 20:18-21 NIV)**

### A. Holy Terror

Recall that in 19:10-13, elaborate preparations had to be made before God and Israel took their covenantal vows together on

Mount Sinai. The people were to consecrate themselves by washing their garments, and Moses was instructed to set up secure boundaries at the foot of the mountain lest God’s holiness break out, causing instant death. God was impressing upon his people that so Other is his holiness, it is dangerous. It is raw and ragged, wild and untamable. It is not available for domestication. Get too close without proper protection, or transgress its inviolable laws, and it will break out like radiation and destroy.

On the morning of the third day, Moses escorted Israel like a bride out of her wedding chamber to take her holy vows before God. As Israel approached the mountain, Sinai lit up with flashes of lightning, and plumes of smoke billowed out like a volcano in the onset of labor. The peals of thunder were deafening. In antiphonal response, Israel heard the piercing cry of a mysterious shophar (ram’s horn), perhaps trumpeted by an angel. The sound of the shophar got louder and louder, announcing “the awe inspiring descent of the King of all the earth to deliver the Ten Words to His people.”<sup>2</sup> Upon the King’s arrival, Israel hears the historic Ten Words.

### B. Request for a Mediator

This massive display of sight and sound causes Israel to recoil in fear (*nua’*—“to shake,” “tremble,” “stagger,” “totter;” see also Isa 6:4; 19:1; Dan 10:10). She has the clear sense that venturing too close to the holy will be fatal. So Israel wisely keeps her distance. But even then she is not sure if her frail senses can endure any more revelation after hearing the Ten Words, so she pleads with Moses to take on the role of mediator. He can take their place and venture into that dangerous realm of God’s presence to listen to that fearsome voice, while they remain at a safe distance. Everything that Moses hears he can then can speak to them and they will obey. But no longer can they endure God’s voice directly.

**“But now, why should we die? This great fire will consume us, and we will die if we hear the voice of the LORD our God any longer.” (Deut 5:25)**

### C. Holy Fear Replaces Holy Terror

Moses gives heed to their request and answers their fear with, “fear not.” God has come not to kill them, but to test the authenticity of their faith. The term “test” (*nasah*) can also have the sense “of trying something on (1 Sam 17:39), of getting used to something (Deut 28:56), of experiencing something or someone in depth and at first hand (2 Chron 32:31).<sup>3</sup> Israel has been granted a vivid, firsthand experience of the presence of God so palpable that, like a hot branding iron, it sears the nerve of her sacred memory. This unforgettable experience of seeing his glory and hearing his words was designed to so overwhelm Israel that her mind and heart would be constantly governed with a healthy “fear” to keep her from sinning and missing out on the life that God offers. In accordance with their request, the people remain at a distance. From there they watch Moses disappear up the mountain, into the deep darkness of God’s holy presence.

Later in Deuteronomy, Moses reports how pleased God was with the spirit of their request, so much so he longed that it would continue forever.

**“I have heard what this people said to you. Everything they said was good. Oh, that their hearts would be inclined to fear**

me and keep all my commands always, so that it might go well with them and their children forever!" (Deut 5:28-29)

### III. Do We Honor Him with Holy Fear?

Though God's ground breaking and earth shattering theophany at Sinai was an event unique in Israel's history, the text reveals what happens when he who is wholly Other breaks into our common world. Gowen summarizes it as extreme opposites: "God's appearance on the mountain is thus described as both frightening and attractive, daunting and fascinating. We shall see that these apparent opposites seem to appear whenever a person senses the immediate presence of God, and we may find it convincing to conclude that they represent more than human psychology—that they but reveal something about the very nature of God."<sup>4</sup>

On the one hand, one feels a disturbing distance of infinite proportions between our frail, broken humanity and the majestic glory of what is seen. So vast is this chasm it is immeasurable, fearful and terrible. Gazing on God's glory, Israel shudders, recoils, trembles, and is shaken speechless to the core of her being. But on the other hand, God's appearance is so attractive and fascinating that it draws us inexplicably towards it with fervor and urgency. And through the miraculous work of a mediator who will risk his life to stand between God and his people, we are able to remain in God's magisterial presence and not die. The wonder of it all! Do you think Moses himself knew how in the world he could enter the heart of God's presence and not die?

#### A. Cultivating Humility through Seeing

Reflecting on this text, it seems that it clearly sets forth the pre-requisite for creating communities of *shalom* on earth. Before we can begin to foster healthy relationships on earth, we need a deep, abiding spirit of humility. By contrast, the most destructive and damaging spirit to community life is self-righteousness. Self-righteous people are the worst at building relationships, reaching across cultural or national divides, or healing the wounded. They live in the isolation of their watertight theologies and carefully reasoned apologetics. Ethically they boast in what they haven't done, but spiritually they refuse to take that risk of reaching out to the foreigner, the poor or needy. Hurling rhetoric from insulated bunkers is always easier than building a relationship. Humility, by contrast, takes you places you thought you could never go and risks opening hearts sealed shut behind walls of accumulated pain.

So how do we cultivate genuine humility? It cannot be faked. The only way to acquire it is to have an encounter with the Holy. When you do that, so magnified is your sense of sin and unworthiness, you tremble in terror. You are left speechless, with no more justification or pretense. Everything caves under you into a well of brokenness and weeping. Our only words are as Peter's when he fell down at Jesus' knees, "Go away from me, Lord; I am a sinful man!" (Luke 5:8) But by God's grace, it doesn't end there. As we are consumed in fear, we hear the soothing words of our mediator, "Fear not," and in awe we see him making his way up the mountain. Christ has become our New and better Moses, opening up the way to God's holy mountain, the very throne room of heaven itself, by the shedding of his own blood in the agony of Golgotha. Spellbound, we are irresistibly drawn by an

inexplicable love right into the center of God's heart: I am fully known, yet I am fully loved.

Today as we gather, our spiritual senses are to comprehend a sight more glorious than Sinai. The writer of Hebrews stirs our imaginations:

But you have come to Mount Zion, to the heavenly Jerusalem, the city of the living God. You have come to thousands upon thousands of angels in joyful assembly, to the church of the firstborn, whose names are written in heaven. You have come to God, the judge of all men, to the spirits of righteous men made perfect, to Jesus the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel. (Heb 12:22-24)

#### B. Humility Makes us Attentive to Hearing

As Israel is invited to be a covenant partner with Yahweh, she is not only privileged to "see" the awesome majesty of his glory, she is also allowed to "hear" the commands of a holy God directly from his mouth. These complementary themes of seeing and hearing highlight Israel's dual role as the people of God on earth. Israel has two chief concerns. Firstly, she is to fix her gaze in heaven to behold the beauty and holiness of the Lord; and secondly, she is to be equally diligent to imitate his ethical justice on earth. One cannot exist without the other. The first is worked out in the building of the tabernacle (Exod 25-31; 35-40), the second in the ethical teachings of the Book of the Covenant, Leviticus and Deuteronomy. Thus, as Brueggemann suggests, "The obedience of Israel as Yahweh's partner concerns the demanding practice of neighborliness and the rigorous discipline of presence with God."<sup>5</sup>

As Christians we must never separate the two. This is why almost every New Testament letter begins first with theology, fixing our gaze on the glorious work of Christ, and ends with teachings on practical ethics for everyday living. Like Israel, our ethical transformation begins by seeing, and then true "seeing" leads to humble doing.

Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. And we, who with unveiled faces all reflect the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit. (2 Cor 3:17-18)

And so Sunday after Sunday we humbly gather to hear the voice of God from his holy mountain. For us, the stakes of obedience are even higher than at Sinai.

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? (Heb 12:25)

Such is the fruit of holy fear, imparting a humility birthed in our brokenness and making us supremely attentive to God's voice that speaks into the heart of all our relationships. Such texts ought to cause us to consider how much of God's holiness have we desecrated through careless preparation and easy communion? Janzen well sums up the modern approach to worship in the West:

For many Christians, worship is no longer the awe-filled gathering before a holy God, to adore God and listen to God's will. It is, instead, a chummy fellowship with each other, in small groups if possible, in which God has been reduced to the status of an invisible equal. Only on a few occasions do moderns stop short in awe and silence – perhaps in the face of a great disaster, an unexplainable escape or healing, or a surprise encounter with exceptional beauty or goodness. Our Sinai text can be a reminder, together with many older hymns and ritual traditions, that everyday life gains ultimate meaning only as it is oriented toward a holy God.<sup>6</sup>

As we continue to study Israel's laws for cultivating communities of *shalom* in weeks to come, let us never forget that the base of our operations is holy humility. Without it we cannot even begin.

### Services<sup>7</sup>

Carl Rakosi

There was man in the land of Ur.

Who's that at my coattails?  
A pale cocksman.

Hush!  
The rabbi walks in thought  
as in an ordained measure  
to the Ark  
and slowly opens its great doors.  
The congregation rises  
and faces the six torahs  
of the covenant  
and all beyond.  
The Ark glows.  
Hear, O Israel!

The rabbi stands before the light  
inside, alone, and prays.  
It is a modest prayer  
for the responsibilities of his office.  
The congregation is silent.

I too pray:  
Let Leah my wife be recompensed for her sweet smile  
and our many years of companionship  
and not stick me when she cuts my hair.  
And let her stay at my side at large gatherings.  
And let my son George and his wife Leanna  
and my daughter Barbara be close,  
and let their children, Jennifer, Julie and Joanna  
be my sheep  
and I their old shepherd.

Let them remain as they are.  
And let not my white hair frighten me.

The tiger leaps,  
the baboon cries,  
Pity, pity,  
The rabbi prays.

There was a man in the land of Ur.

I, son of Leopold and Flora,  
also pray:  
I pray for meaning.  
I pray for the physical,  
for my soul needs no suppliant.  
I pray for man.

And may a special providence look out  
for those who feel deeply.

<sup>1</sup> Waldemar Janzen, *Exodus* (BCBC; Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 2000), 286. Janzen sees Deuteronomy applying the laws in the broadest context of the whole nation: "In an expansion of this viewpoint, the Deuteronomic collection of laws generally addresses the life of Israel as a whole; Deut 12-26."

<sup>2</sup> Robert Alter, *The Five Books of Moses: A Translation with Commentary* (New York: Norton, 2004), 426.

<sup>3</sup> John I. Durham, *Exodus* (WBC; Waco: Word, 1987), 303.

<sup>4</sup> Donald E. Gowan, *Theology in Exodus, Biblical Theology in the Form of a Commentary* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1994), 28. Gowan gives an excellent analysis of Rudolf Otto's classic work *The Idea of the Holy*, where Otto defines the experience of the holy with three key terms, *mysterium, tremendum, and fascinans*, 31-53.

<sup>5</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), 429.

<sup>6</sup> Janzen, *Exodus*, 248-249.

<sup>7</sup> Jules Chametzky, John Felstiner, Hilene Flanzbaum, Kathryn Hellerstein, eds., *Jewish American Literature, A Norton Anthology* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2001), 611-612. Carl Rakosi (1903-2004) was born in Berlin to Hungarian parents with roots in Orthodox Judaism. He immigrated to America in 1910, and at the University of Chicago began writing poetry, and followed by "a long career in social work, eventually directing the Jewish Family and Children's Service of Minneapolis. This work was his 'way of listening,' as poetry was his 'way of seeing.'" (609) Carl lived out his final years in San Francisco. I had the privilege of hearing the poet read this poem just prior to his death. As he read, a holy hush filled the room with a rare dignity and tender humility that only age can bring.