

Laws for Life and Wellbring

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[0 : 0 0] Well, if you have your Bibles with you, please turn back to Exodus chapter 20, and we're actually going to begin in verse 22. Recently, in light of the pandemic, some newspaper archives have been uncovered of the Spanish flu in 1918.

So here's one in Seattle announcing the closure of churches, schools, and shows. Here's another, talking about closing moving picture halls and pool rooms.

A bit small, but you probably can come quite close to your TV to see that. It's rather strange reading these, isn't it? Because they're sort of eerily familiar.

Some things haven't changed. We still see these wide-scale closures. Yet on the other hand, it's all a little quaint. The typeset, for instance, with the newsprint.

The use of the phrase moving picture halls, which we now call cinemas. And no one really cares if pool rooms are closed today anymore.

[1 : 1 0] But back then, it must have been the rage for them to warrant separate mention. And I think when we read the laws of Exodus today, that's sort of the same feeling we get.

Except we're separated not by a hundred years, but by thousands. In the laws, we find things that are quaint and puzzling. And yet, there's a familiarity with them.

Because some things haven't changed much. More importantly, the giver of these laws, God, he hasn't changed. Last week, as we looked at the Ten Commandments, it didn't feel quite so strange. Because they were universal in character. Do not commit adultery. Do not kill. They're very much still current. But this week, some of the laws we read, like slavery or bulls going to death people, they all appear a bit less relevant, don't they?

Except this is still God's Word. And so we have a prior conviction, don't we, that they're still relevant. Not in the same way that they were relevant to Israel.

[2 : 1 9] Because remember, as I said, as Christians, we don't need to keep them to be in relationship with God. Rather, we now have relationship with Him because of Jesus. He kept the law for us.

We have relationship with God through faith in Him. But as I said last week, these laws are still relevant because they reflect God's character. God hasn't changed.

He's the same yesterday, today, forever. And so we desire to keep these laws, not because we have to, but because we want to, out of love for Him, so that our lives reflect His character.

So the question is then, how do we do it? Given that the laws were specific to their context. Well, by understanding the principle that underlies them.

Universal principles reflecting God's values. And once we work them out, we apply those principles then to our own context.

[3 : 2 5] Which means I think we don't need to get tied up with every detail in the passage. Some of which we won't get because the original situation is no longer clear to us. But as long as the underlying principle is still clear, then we can apply those.

Now as I said, I won't be covering every verse tonight, but given that we've got a chance for Q&A; later, you can ask them. But I also encourage you to read them again in your own time.

And perhaps work out what those principles are for yourself. So with that as a way of introduction, let's begin then in chapter 20 and verse 22.

There it reads, Then the Lord said to Moses, Tell the Israelites this, You have seen for yourselves that I have spoken to you from heaven. Do not make any gods to be alongside me.

Do not make for yourselves gods of silver or of gold. Make an altar of earth for me and sacrifice on it your burnt offerings and fellowship offerings, your sheep and goats and your cattle.

[4 : 29] Wherever I cause my name to be honored, I will come to you and bless you. If you make an altar of stone for me, do not build it with dressed stones, for you will defile it if you use a tool on it.

And do not go on my altar on steps, or your private parts may be exposed. Now first of all, please put the image of private parts out of your minds, because I know it's there, but it's not the main point, is it?

Instead, consider what the underlying principle of this entire section is. I want to submit to you that it's to do with the importance of true worship, which I've got as a first point on the outline.

Like the first and second commandments, this has two parts. Worship of false gods, on the one hand, and making idols of silver and gold out of them.

And on the other hand, a false worship of God. Worship of false gods and false worship of God. Both are abhorrent to Him. So, we may not quite get why we have to use undressed stones, or why exposing the private parts over the altar defiles it, although we can probably guess.

[5 : 49] But we can see that what underlies these instructions is that true worship is important to God. Again, for us as Christians, this principle is now applied differently by Paul in Romans chapter 12 like this.

He says that the sacrifice Christians now offer as worship is now our bodies. And then in verse 1, it says, This is our true and proper worship, holy and pleasing to Him.

It's not the sacrifice offered for forgiveness of sin, but it's the offering of worship to God. But then Paul continues in verse 2 to say, on the next slide, This involves not being conformed to the world, but in renewing our minds, which we're able to do when we know God's Word.

But for us, this worship now applies 24-7. Every minute of every day, and not just on worship, on Sundays, becomes worship to God.

Everything we do, even in our homes or bedrooms, not just at church, are acts of worship. Every email or text message we send, every word we say, everything we read or post on social media, we either worship God truly with Him, or else falsely.

[7 : 18] We're either making idols of things, living dishonorably to God, or else truly worshipping Him. So the stakes are much higher, aren't they?

24-7, everything we do, not just what we bring to a physical altar. And in the laws that now follow, part of true worship to God involves how we treat one another.

Many of these laws, if you look at it closely, are extensions of the Ten Commandments, but they are now applied to daily aspects of life, to common areas of dispute, where humans fail each other.

So let's look at some of this detail, and so we're going to look at verse 1 now, of Exodus 21. And so reading, If you buy a Hebrew servant, he is to serve you for six years, but in the seventh year he shall go free, without paying anything.

If he comes alone, he is to go free alone, but if he has a wife when he comes, she is to go with him. If his master gives him a wife, and she bears him sons or daughters, the woman and her children shall belong to her master, and only the man shall go free.

[8 : 27] But if the servant declares, I love my master and my wife and children, and do not want to go free, then his master must take him before the judges. He should take him to the door, or the doorpost, and pierce his ear with an owl.

Then he will be his servant for life. If a man sells his daughter as a servant, she is not to go free as male servants do. If she does not please the master, who has selected her for himself, he must let her be redeemed.

He has no right to sell her to foreigners, because he has broken faith with her. If he selects her for his son, he must grant her the rights of a daughter. If he marries another woman, he must not deprive the first one of her food, clothing, and marital rights.

If he does not provide her with these three things, she is to go free without any payment of money. Now, firstly, you're right to notice that there is a difference between male and female servants, but that's just due to the way society functioned then.

A man headed up the house and inherited the estate. On the other hand, a woman wasn't independent. She either belonged to her father's house or to her husband's.

[9 : 34] Even a widow would have been cared for by her son. Notice, too, that they apply to Hebrews, that is, citizens of Israel. And so such people will end up in such a situation most likely only through misfortune or error.

Most probably they had to pay off a debt. So either this debt was owed to the master himself to which the servant becomes bonded, or perhaps it was paid for by this person, and therefore he becomes a slave to him as a result.

But see there, that no matter how big the debt is, the period of servitude is no longer than seven years. It's limited. There is an end date. Now in the case of the female, she's probably either sold as a servant or to be a future wife.

And she finds herself in this position not because of her own error or misfortune, but probably because of her father's. But again, let's try and understand the principle here.

This is a big contrast, isn't it? And we're meant to see this between Israel's slavery in Egypt and what God is asking them to do now. And what God's asking of them is to protect the vulnerable or the powerless.

[10:55] God has a realism about human condition. Yes, humans slip up and misfortunes happen. As a result, there are inequalities, and such inequalities create power differences.

But then God wants the powerless to be protected in these situations. He doesn't want their weaknesses to be taken advantage of. Hence, on the next slide, you see the point.

The principle here is the protection of the powerless. He puts limits on the abuse the powerful can inflict. In fact, he put limits so that abuse doesn't happen at all.

And yet, he also knows that given human nature, the powerless can sometimes exploit as well, even in their weakness. And so he puts safeguards for the powerful as well.

He gives hope to the powerless on one hand, but he also ensures that the generous, the powerful don't feel used. That's why we have that verse in verse 3.

[11:56] If a master provides a wife for his slave, then the wife cannot take her or their children when he's free. And that's because the master in this situation has provided more than what he's required.

He's been generous beyond what is asked of him. And so for the slave then to take his family too, when he's free, would have been an unfair thing for the master.

Instead, God provides that if the slave really loved his family, then the fair thing for him to do, in recognition of his master's generosity, is to pledge ongoing loyalty to him beyond that seven years that he's a servant.

I think it carefully balances both sides, don't you think? And so in doing that, God, I think, creates the conditions for a mutual commitment to be freely entered into between the master and the servant beyond the initial obligation.

It's similar to our relationships today as well. Many have some power inequality inherent to them. So parents and children, leaders and followers, and even among equals, sometimes there's one party that's stronger than the other.

[13:13] But God desires that we protect the weak so that parents ought to love their children and children obey them.

But even as those safeguards are in place and mandated, as it were, ultimately, he would rather have both sides honour these relationships because they want to, not because they have to. Both sides can see the blessing of living within this relationship. And you think about it a bit more, in the end, that's how God wants that to be with us as well, and him.

He's our master, and rightly so, yet he wants us to follow him willingly, not out of force. He wants our wholehearted and not grudging worship.

And he deserves that because he's been more than generous to us in his relationship with us. So can you see the principle there? And then applied to our context because we don't have the situation of slavery, do we, in our modern day context.

[14:19] Okay, let's move on now. This next section is a long one, but essentially, they are laws related to life and the damage to property and body. So here is my third point.

God provides for the protection of life, body, and property. But as you read, I hope you noticed that there was an order of severity there, wasn't there? Loss of life is more severe than injury to the body, and that is in turn more severe than loss of property.

You see that in the severity of the punishment. So right at the top, in verses 12 to 17, God places a premium on the sanctity of human life.

So we read, anyone who strikes a person with a fatal blow is to be put to death. However, if it is done intentionally, not done intentionally, but God lets it happen, they are to flee to a place where I

will designate.

But if anyone schemes and kills someone deliberately, that person is to be taken from my altar and put to death. Anyone who attacks their father or mother is put to death. Anyone who kidnats someone is to be put to death.

[15 : 26] Whether the victim has been sold or is still in the kidnapper's possession, anyone who curses their father or mother is to be put to death. Now, have you seen on the screen following along, there are four anyone statements here, aren't there?

Each one is punishable by death. Only in the first one does the victim die, but the others are also still punishable by death. Why?

Because I think that to show dishonor to your parents or to rob someone of freedom through kidnapping, that's tantamount to taking their lives away in God's eyes.

Human life, therefore, we see from these verses, that's a principle, is precious to God. But God also recognizes that accidents do happen and he takes intent into account.

So he says that if the accident, if the death was accidental, a heat of the moment thing, then a place of refuge is provided for the perpetrator. It's similar, I think, to the difference we see between murder and manslaughter today.

[16 : 31] But lest you think that the killer goes scot-free, well, just remember that the refuge, a place of refuge, is in paradise. when he goes there, he loses his freedom of movement.

But the principle underlying all this is that human life is precious. And this is revolutionary in those times because as we read, there's actually no distinction between rich or poor, male or female, slave or master.

Every life is precious to God. And so we too need to value the sanctity of life. I've seen, for example, people arguing in politics, they pit the life of an unborn child against that of an asylum seeker, comparing the policies of some parties that are anti-abortion and then others that are more humane to asylum seekers.

Well, it's not really an either-or, is it? It shouldn't be. It should be a both. God's desire is to protect the weak and those of us who have the power ought to use it to protect them.

Likewise, in this COVID-19 crisis, we mustn't treat the lives of some as more valuable than others. Rather, those of us who have the means to protect our own health ought to consider those who are at risk, those who are weaker, those who have less means to protect themselves and consider how we can help protect them.

[18 : 00] Now, some have also asked whether these laws mean that government should reinstate the death penalty. I think that's a complex debate and as Christians, we don't look at just this part of the Bible but at the whole Bible to make up our minds.

But at the very least, though, these laws, I think, show us that capital punishment isn't necessarily unbiblical. I know that there are some who argue that it is, that if we value human life, then we shouldn't be taking human life as a form of punishment.

But if you think about it, it's precisely why human life is so precious that when it's wrongly taken, only the death of the killer makes up for that loss.

Anything else cheapens the life that was taken in one sense. that's why families of victims often feel cheated, don't they? If the guilty party say a drunken driver is let off lightly, they speak of being traumatized again by the system because the life of their loved ones has been devalued by the leniency of the punishment.

Now, whether that means we reinstate capital punishment, well, I'm not sure we go straight there. But can you see that actually there is a basis for saying that if someone has taken a life, then the payment of that by his own life is actually a fair outcome.

[19 : 32] And in a sense, we see that exchange precisely on the cross, don't we? The death required by God of His Son for us shows just how serious our sins really are.

Only the precious death of His Son can atone for what we've done and who we are. But the amazing thing is that we've offended God and yet God is the one who offers His Son on our behalf. That's the amazing grace of God that we have through Jesus. Now, from there, God moves on to deal with less severe crimes.

So, verses 18 to 36 deal with personal injuries to the body, largely, and then chapter 22, which we didn't get to read, verses 1 to 15 deal with property damage.

There's a lot of cases here, but I think if you look at verse 23, that's the key to interpreting these verses. So, on the slide, it says, but if there is serious injury, you are to take life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, burn for burn, wound for wound, bruise for bruise.

[20 : 49] So, while there may be a lot of nuances and subtleties in each of those verses, I think this is the general rule that applies. Now, of course, when we hear this eye for eye phrase, we often think it's a license for revenge, but actually, it's simply a provision for just compensation.

The rule states that when things go wrong, and they will in life, whether intentional or not, then the wrong or injured party is to be fairly compensated.

This fairness, though, is to apply for both parties, the wronged as well as the one doing wrong.

What do I mean by that? Well, it means that it's not just eye for eye or tooth for tooth, but only an eye for eye and only a tooth for a tooth.

That's why if you look in the verse before, verse 22, just in the verse before, when a pregnant woman is injured and gives birth prematurely, but without serious injury, the guilty party pays what the husband demands, but only as much as the court allows.

It's not an open book, open checkbook for the husband. Likewise, when we're seeking to right a wrong, the wrong party is not fair game whatever we want.

[22 : 13] It's only what is fair. What God provides for is a basis for a fair outcome, so that when a case comes before a judge, this is how he's able to decide what is fair.

But notice, though, that as it is today, not everything needs to be settled in court. Whenever there's a dispute, parties can actually reach their own agreement.

They don't have to come to the judge to get it decided before a judge. And so for us as Christians, when we read Jesus' instructions, Jesus actually says, don't bring it to court, but actually, if you are the guilty party, then seek to overcompensate for the wrong you've done.

And if you are the one that is wronged, then undercompensate, seek less than what you think is fair, or even forgive. So if you look at Matthew 5, verse 38, Jesus says, that instead of an eye for an eye, turn the other cheek.

If they want to sue you for a shirt, Jesus says, hand them your coat as well. Do this because, as Paul puts it in Ephesians 4, verse 32, forgive, just as in Christ, God forgave you.

[23 : 36] do this because you realize how much more God has done for you. But we need to realize here that Jesus is talking here to individuals, encouraging them to offer grace and generosity willingly, outside the judicial system, as it were.

Paul is not asking, Jesus is not asking here that when cases come before governments and judges, that they do this. This is really only for individuals.

Rather, when cases come before governments and judges, then their job is to provide fair and just outcomes, as it is provided here in Exodus chapter 21 and 22.

After all, if you recall, Paul says that they wield the sword, that is, they are to judge fairly. It's only when governments enforce justice that it creates room for individuals to then give freely and forgive. What I'm saying is that the law provides for grace, but the law cannot mandate grace. And we see that in the gospel, don't we?

[24 : 52] Because Jesus had to come to offer grace. The law itself was not capable of doing it. And as leaders, we need to get this distinction right when we are in leadership and being made to decide outcomes.

Our role as leaders in disputes is actually to be fair. Yes, it's to protect the vulnerable, and we can encourage grace and forgiveness. That's what I often ask my children to do.

But only the individual parties involved can show grace and generosity. We cannot force them to forgive. our role is not to side with the abuser or the wrongdoer, for instance, in the name of grace.

We need to exercise justice with restraint. Otherwise, what we've done is show no regard for the wrong that has been done. We cheapen, as it were, or we make light, as it were, the sin or the abuse.

Okay, as I said, there's so much more I could cover, but I'm keen to hear your reflections and questions. So, what we're going to do now is I'm going to give you a minute or two that you can go over the remaining verses all the way up to chapter 22 and verse 15, and then start sending me the questions.

[26 : 12] So, those details are on the screen again, and then when there's a 30 second countdown clock, I'll wrap up, get your questions, and then later on in the service, I'll get to some of them.

Okay, off you go. Okay, thanks so much for your view and consideration of the other verses, and I've seen some questions come in already, so I'll have a look at them after I finish here, and while you're singing and praying.

But let me summarize in conclusion. We've seen tonight that God's laws reflect who He is, and we apply them or understand His will by understanding the underlying principles in them.

The specific situation may no longer be applicable, but the principles are. And so when we keep the principles, we become like Him. So we've learned, for example, that God seeks true worship from us, involving our entire lives.

And that includes in part the way we treat one another. In particular, God desires that the powerless be protected. It. But for relationships also between the strong and the weak, to flourish voluntarily, not to be coerced.

[27 : 33] That's the way He desires us to relate to Him as Master. He also values human life, so much so He sent His Son to redeem us from sin.

And He values justice and just compensation. But within that, He encourages us to individually show grace and generosity. When we look at these laws, they may seem quaint and archaic at first, but hopefully we've caught a glimpse of their relevance.

As you understand the principles underlying them, hopefully it opens up your mind to God's mind and heart and will and the beauty of His ways.

And then, by keeping them, we become like Him. Let's pray. Father, thank You that You are a just and true God, and yet You are gracious and compassionate, constantly looking out for the weak and powerless.

Help us who have much to be like You, gracious and generous. Help us to do it, because when we were weak, You came and saved us for Your Son, Jesus.

[28 : 44] And it's in His name we pray. Amen.