

DEVOTIONAL 4

GOD IN OUR MIDST



EXODUS 22:1-9, 21-31, 23:1-2

¹ “If a man steals an ox or a sheep, and kills it or sells it, he shall repay five oxen for an ox, and four sheep for a sheep. ² If a thief is found breaking in and is struck so that he dies, there shall be no bloodguilt for him, ³ but if the sun has risen on him, there shall be bloodguilt for him. He shall surely pay. If he has nothing, then he shall be sold for his theft. ⁴ If the stolen beast is found alive in his possession, whether it is an ox or a donkey or a sheep, he shall pay double.

⁵ “If a man causes a field or vineyard to be grazed over, or lets his beast loose and it feeds in another man’s field, he shall make restitution from the best in his own field and in his own vineyard.

⁶ “If fire breaks out and catches in thorns so that the stacked grain or the standing grain or the field is consumed, he who started the fire shall make full restitution.

⁷ “If a man gives to his neighbor money or goods to keep safe, and it is stolen from the man’s house, then, if the thief is found, he shall pay double. ⁸ If the thief is not found, the owner of the house shall come near to God to show whether or not he has put his hand to his neighbor’s property. ⁹ For every breach of trust, whether it is for an ox, for a donkey, for a sheep, for a cloak, or for any kind of lost thing, of which one says, ‘This is it,’ the case of both parties shall come before God. The one whom God condemns shall pay double to his neighbor.

²¹ “You shall not wrong a sojourner or oppress him, for you were sojourners in the land of Egypt. ²² You shall not mistreat any widow or fatherless child. ²³ If you do mistreat them, and they cry out to me, I will surely hear their cry, ²⁴ and my wrath will burn, and I will kill you with the sword, and your wives shall become widows and your children fatherless.

²⁵ “If you lend money to any of my people with you who is poor, you shall not be like a moneylender to him, and you shall not exact interest from him. ²⁶ If ever you take your neighbor’s cloak in pledge, you shall return it to him before the sun goes down, ²⁷ for that is his only covering, and it is his cloak for his body; in what else shall he sleep? And if he cries to me, I will hear, for I am compassionate.

²⁸ “You shall not revile God, nor curse a ruler of your people.

²⁹ “You shall not delay to offer from the fullness of your harvest and from the outflow of your presses. The firstborn of your sons you shall give to me. ³⁰ You shall do the same with your oxen and with your sheep: seven days it shall be with its mother; on the eighth day you shall give it to me.

³¹ “You shall be consecrated to me. Therefore you shall not eat any flesh that is torn by beasts in the field; you shall throw it to the dogs.

^{23:1} “You shall not spread a false report. You shall not join hands with a wicked man to be a malicious witness. ² You shall not fall in with the many to do evil, nor shall you bear witness in a lawsuit, siding with the many, so as to pervert justice, nor shall you be partial to a poor man in his lawsuit.”

DAY 1

EXODUS 22:1-9

¹“If a man steals an ox or a sheep, and kills it or sells it, he shall repay five oxen for an ox, and four sheep for a sheep. ² If a thief is found breaking in and is struck so that he dies, there shall be no bloodguilt for him, ³ but if the sun has risen on him, there shall be bloodguilt for him. He shall surely pay. If he has nothing, then he shall be sold for his theft. ⁴ If the stolen beast is found alive in his possession, whether it is an ox or a donkey or a sheep, he shall pay double. ⁵ “If a man causes a field or vineyard to be grazed over, or lets his beast loose and it feeds in another man’s field, he shall make restitution from the best in his own field and in his own vineyard. ⁶ “If fire breaks out and catches in thorns so that the stacked grain or the standing grain or the field is consumed, he who started the fire shall make full restitution. ⁷ “If a man gives to his neighbor money or goods to keep safe, and it is stolen from the man’s house, then, if the thief is found, he shall pay double. ⁸ If the thief is not found, the owner of the house shall come near to God to show whether or not he has put his hand to his neighbor’s property. ⁹ For every breach of trust, whether it is for an ox, for a donkey, for a sheep, for a cloak, or for any kind of lost thing, of which one says, ‘This is it,’ the case of both parties shall come before God. The one whom God condemns shall pay double to his neighbor.

From Gordon Gekko’s famous “Greed is Good” speech in Oliver Stone’s 1987 film *Wall Street* to the college student with the poster on the wall with multiple luxury cars parked at an amazing house with the caption “Justification for Higher Education” to the old bumper sticker “The One Who Dies with the Most Toys Wins,” people, Americans in particular, have been fascinated with acquiring things. On the other hand, some spiritual traditions have renounced all worldly possessions, claiming that this is the way to show our love for God above all. So what kind of society did God imagine?

As we see from these opening verses in Exodus 22, God is concerned about the property rights of his people. There is an acknowledgment that people will own goods—goods that will have value—and God does not treat this as an afterthought. Rather, he erects a society in which property matters. Much of this can be traced back to the Garden of Eden in which Adam and Eve were placed to “tend and keep” all that God had created. The world belongs to God, who has given it to humanity to steward. We are not to eschew God’s good gift, but we are to cultivate it.

Yet, while property matters to God, greed is not good. There are boundaries and limits to our property stewardship—we cannot steal; we must respect the things that belong to others; we must be generous with what we have—for God is the ultimate owner of all he has created. After all, God not only created the world, but bought it back by generously giving his Son.

So how are you with your things? Do you think too much about them? Too little? How do you think about the things of others? Are they a source of covetousness or are you content with what you have been given?

PRAYER

Father, this is your world. We recognize that and worship you for your power and wisdom in creation. We also acknowledge that you have given us stewardship over your creation. Give us contentment in what you have given us, wisdom to steward it well, and a heart of gratitude that recognizes you as sovereign. We pray this all in Jesus's name. Amen.

DAY 2

EXODUS 22: 1-9

¹“If a man steals an ox or a sheep, and kills it or sells it, he shall repay five oxen for an ox, and four sheep for a sheep. ² If a thief is found breaking in and is struck so that he dies, there shall be no bloodguilt for him, ³ but if the sun has risen on him, there shall be bloodguilt for him. He shall surely pay. If he has nothing, then he shall be sold for his theft. ⁴ If the stolen beast is found alive in his possession, whether it is an ox or a donkey or a sheep, he shall pay double. ⁵ “If a man causes a field or vineyard to be grazed over, or lets his beast loose and it feeds in another man’s field, he shall make restitution from the best in his own field and in his own vineyard. ⁶ “If fire breaks out and catches in thorns so that the stacked grain or the standing grain or the field is consumed, he who started the fire shall make full restitution. ⁷ “If a man gives to his neighbor money or goods to keep safe, and it is stolen from the man’s house, then, if the thief is found, he shall pay double. ⁸ If the thief is not found, the owner of the house shall come near to God to show whether or not he has put his hand to his neighbor’s property. ⁹ For every breach of trust, whether it is for an ox, for a donkey, for a sheep, for a cloak, or for any kind of lost thing, of which one says, ‘This is it,’ the case of both parties shall come before God. The one whom God condemns shall pay double to his neighbor.

Restitution

These laws of restitution are excellent examples of laws that make greater sense when we ask the questions posed by Old Testament scholar Christopher Wright, as Addison presented in his sermon on June 27. The answers point us in the direction of a comprehensive understanding about God and what he wants for his community.

What was the objective of the law?

As the British say, “To put things to rights”—to restore the community to its correct or normal state.

What kind of situation was it trying to prevent or promote?

The laws were preventing the possibility of someone enriching themselves at the expense of another unjustly.

What kind of people would have benefited from or been protected by this law?

People who were being exploited or manipulated, in other words, victims of crimes.

What kind of people would have been restrained by this law?

People who were inclined to try to take advantage of others.

What motivations were there for obeying this law?

The level of the restitution meant that the offending person stood to lose much more than he could gain by taking advantage of others.

What values, norms, or principles are embodied in this law?

Respect for other people, their property, and their crops was foundational to functioning communities and to the nation of Israel. The breakdown of respect would lead to chaos and a dysfunctional community, which would not honor God and would in fact destroy the community in the long run.

Prison Fellowship, founded by Chuck Colson, recognizes the importance of restitution within the whole framework of the justice system. They believe: "Punishment for crime must include opportunities for people to make restitution where necessary, build personal character and reestablish trust." They seek justice that restores, prioritizes, and respects victims by providing assistance, validation, and restitution. Concretely, they ask courts to employ alternative sentences that focus on rehabilitation and restitution in place of incarceration. In this light, Prison Fellowship has been a strong advocate for sentencing reforms that reflect this biblical teaching.

We should again take comfort that *mercy* is the practical outworking of the laws of Exodus in our biblical teaching today.

PRAYER

Thank you, Lord, for Chuck Colson and the ministry he started as a result of his own prison experience. Thank you for Prison Fellowship's advocacy for laws that reflect biblical teaching. Thank you that this advocacy changes lives, heals families of offenders, and helps victims all at the same time. Give their representatives wisdom as they present these concepts in various courts throughout the land. And help each of us look for ways in our own lives to show mercy and justice to others.

DAY 3

EXODUS 22:25-27, 23:1-3

²⁵ “If you lend money to any of my people with you who is poor, you shall not be like a moneylender to him, and you shall not exact interest from him. ²⁶ If ever you take your neighbor’s cloak in pledge, you shall return it to him before the sun goes down, ²⁷ for that is his only covering, and it is his cloak for his body; in what else shall he sleep? And if he cries to me, I will hear, for I am compassionate.

^{23:1} “You shall not spread a false report. You shall not join hands with a wicked man to be a malicious witness. ² You shall not fall in with the many to do evil, nor shall you bear witness in a lawsuit, siding with the many, so as to pervert justice, nor shall you be partial to a poor man in his lawsuit.”

As you think about the world’s problems, do you ever feel the tension between ideals like compassion and justice? Sometimes it feels like if we operate with compassion, we will not be operating justly, or if we operate with justice, we have to hold compassion at bay. The Book of the Covenant feels this tension too as God gives instruction on dealing with the poor.

Notice the first set of verses. There the poor are called out as needing special attention, even accommodations, all in the service of compassion and a compassionate God. This fits in with what we have been learning about advocating for the poor. When circumstances press into life in such a way that someone loses their standing or loses their voice, we are to step in on their behalf. Specifically, here God says not to take the last thing they may own or take advantage of their need to borrow money.

But then the second set of verses highlights that in the execution of justice there is to be no partiality to the poor. If wrong has been done, circumstances are to be considered but they are not to be an excuse. The poor are not to be dealt with partially.

Sometimes the way through this tension is clear, other times it is not. The side of the equation that individuals, governments, or churches tend to emphasize can often put them in tension with other good people. This is where wisdom is so desperately needed. Wisdom is knowing when to apply the correct principle in the correct way. Wisdom recognizes the complexity of issues like poverty and knows that sometimes different principles are required.

It is very humbling. As Christians, we should be marked with grace as we seek to offer judgment on things like poverty. At the same time, we should move with confidence as we seek to know Christ who is Wisdom himself. With the Holy Spirit as our counselor, we can indeed move forward.

PRAYER

Father, we confess that we need you to illuminate our hearts and minds to grapple with the deep complexities of our world. We pray for those who struggle with poverty and its diverse causes and effects. We pray that your church may be a voice of compassion when it is appropriate and of justice when justice is warranted. In all things, may you be lifted up as Grace and Truth, as the fountain of all Wisdom. We pray in Jesus's name.

DAY 4

EXODUS 22:29-30

²⁹ “You shall not delay to offer from the fullness of your harvest and from the outflow of your presses. The firstborn of your sons you shall give to me. ³⁰ You shall do the same with your oxen and with your sheep: seven days it shall be with its mother; on the eighth day you shall give it to me.

Let’s ponder these scriptures and consider how they relate to today’s passage:

Exodus 11:4-5a,

So Moses said, “Thus says the Lord: ‘About midnight I will go out in the midst of Egypt, and every firstborn in the land of Egypt shall die....’”

Exodus 12:1-3, 5a, 6-7, 12-13

The Lord said to Moses and Aaron in the land of Egypt, “This month shall be for you the beginning of months. It shall be the first month of the year for you. Tell all the congregation of Israel that on the tenth day of this month every man shall take a lamb according to their fathers’ houses, a lamb for a household.... Your lamb shall be without blemish...and you shall keep it until the fourteenth day of this month, when the whole assembly of the congregation of Israel shall kill their lambs at twilight.

“Then they shall take some of the blood and put it on the two doorposts and the lintel of the houses in which they eat it.

“For I will pass through the land of Egypt that night, and I will strike all the firstborn in the land of Egypt, both man and beast; and on all the gods of Egypt I will execute judgments: I am the Lord. The blood shall be a sign for you, on the houses where you are. And when I see the blood, I will pass over you, and no plague will befall you to destroy you, when I strike the land of Egypt.”

Exodus 13:11-16

“When the Lord brings you into the land of the Canaanites, as he swore to you and your fathers, and shall give it to you, you shall set apart to the Lord all that first opens the womb. All the firstborn of your animals that are males shall be the Lord’s. Every firstborn of a donkey you shall redeem with a lamb.... And when in time to come your son asks you, ‘What does this mean?’ you shall say to him, ‘By a strong hand the Lord brought us out of Egypt, from the house of slavery. For when Pharaoh stubbornly refused to let us go, the Lord killed all the firstborn in the land of Egypt, both the firstborn of man and the firstborn of animals. Therefore I sacrifice to the Lord all the males that first open the womb, but all the firstborn of my sons I redeem.’”

The firstborn Israelites were to be dedicated to God and redeemed by a spotless lamb. The symbolism goes on and on. Consider when God told Abraham to sacrifice his son Isaac, Abraham did not question God, but offered him up until God sent a ram to take his place. Which leads us to offer up grateful hearts to God for Jesus, the spotless lamb who takes our place. The symbolism in his final week is amazing.

As we saw above, “the Torah required selected lambs to be put on public display for four days (Ex. 12:3–6) to verify that they were without blemish. Jesus, following the triumphal entry, presented himself in the temple for that exact period, for that very purpose. He submitted to testing by the Pharisees, Herodians, Sadducees, and scribes (Mark 12:13), tried before the Sanhedrin and Pilate, he proved spotless.”

Sitteima, John. “Meeting Jesus at an Old Testament Feast.” April 12, 2011.

Jesus is the one who makes all redemption possible, so with that in view, offering back the firstfruits of the harvest, of ourselves, becomes the very least we can do, not an overwhelming burden.

PRAYER

Father, continue to reveal the mysteries of these scriptures to us. Show us how they relate to us today, and please keep Jesus always and ever in our hearts and view. Amen.

DAY 5

EXODUS 23:1

“You shall not spread a false report. You shall not join hands with a wicked man to be a malicious witness.”

James tells us that the “tongue is a fire, a world of unrighteousness. The tongue is set among our members, staining the whole body, setting on fire the entire course of life, and set on fire by hell” (3:6). There are very few ways that hurt one another and kill community more quickly than through our tongues.

Here in the Book of the Covenant, God amplifies this truth to his people reminding them not to “bear false witness” (Ex. 20:16) or, as it is here, “spread a false report.” Certainly one aspect of what is being talked about here is the legal setting. God realizes that any society that desires the flourishing of his people needs to be based on truth, not falsehood. But surely this is not only true in the legal setting but in all of our interactions. Malice is the other piece that God instructs his people to avoid. Malice is speech that intends ill will to its recipient or about its recipient. Falsehood and malice, two aspects of speech that destroy society.

Moses was applying this truth to his context. If the scriptures were being written today, I wonder how they would address truth and malice? How would they apply these principles in the internet age? The age of Twitter, Facebook, TikTok, Instagram, and a whole host of social media? Do our rants pass the muster? What about our words in our homes, in the world of business, at school, in the park, in the theater of our minds?

Exodus 23:1 warns against joining hands with a wicked man. By implication, there is great joy in joining hands with a righteous man. Or, even more to the point, there is great joy in being joined to The Righteous Man. Jesus cannot lie. Jesus holds no malice, even to his enemies. May we look to him with humility to tame our tongues.

PRAYER

Father, thank you for our tongues. Thank you for the ability to speak, to sing, to praise, to encourage, to lament. Loosen our tongues to bring you praise. Curb our tongues from anything that would dishonor you or harm our neighbor. We pray in Jesus’s name. Amen.