

The Book of the Covenant

Exodus 20:22–23:33

About ten years ago a journalist/comedian named A. J. Jacobs set out on a year-long experiment that he called *The Year of Living Biblically*.¹ His goal was to follow every rule and command of the Bible as literally as possible. Not just the obvious ones, like the Ten Commandments, but the obscure ones, like Leviticus 19:27: “You shall not round off the hair on your temples or mar the edges of your beard.” Or stoning adulterers per Leviticus 20:10, which he attempted to carry out by throwing pebbles at a dirty old man in Central Park. He and his wife even had twins that year—“be fruitful and multiply”!

Listening to Jacobs talk about it (or reading his bestselling book), you quickly get the sense that his project is more about a humorous gimmick than a genuine spiritual pursuit (not that he didn’t learn important personal lessons). But his idea that living “biblically” means taking every command or rule as literally as possible, devoid of context, devoid of any sense of difference between Israel’s covenant and the new covenant in Christ, illustrates a very serious challenge people face today: what do we do with the Old Testament law? Are we still supposed to obey it? “Whoever sacrifices to any god, other than the LORD alone, shall be devoted to destruction” (Exod. 22:20)—are we supposed to do that?

And if not all laws apply, how do we know which ones do? How do we avoid a Whitman’s Sampler approach to the Bible, where we pick and choose the rules we like and leave out the ones we don’t? This challenge has been amplified in recent years with respect to the Bible’s view on homosexuality. Leviticus 20:13 clearly identifies it as an abomination—a serious offense against God. But the previous chapter tells us not to sow our field with two kinds of seed, or wear a garment made of two kinds of material (Lev. 19:19). I’m pretty sure we have more than a few cotton-polyester blends here this morning—so why obey the one but not the other?

After all, doesn’t Paul tell us in Romans that we are not under law but under grace (Rom 6:14)? So we can just ignore the Old Testament law, right? But then Jesus says, “For truly, I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the Law until all is accomplished. Therefore whoever relaxes one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven” (Matt. 5:18-19).

So what do we do? Is the Old Testament law still relevant today? And if so, what does it look like for us to obey it? This is the question I want to tackle this morning as we look at what’s known as “the Book of the Covenant” in Exodus 20-23. And there are two keys to unraveling this mystery. The first is understanding the law in its original context as part of Israel’s covenant relationship with God—the purpose behind the specific regulations. The second is then filtering those laws through Christ, who fulfilled the law, and through whom we obey it today.

¹ A. J. Jacobs, *The Year of Living Biblically* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2007). See also his [TED talk](#), Dec. 2007.

The Purpose of the Law: The Book of the Covenant in Context

Last week Travis walked us through the Ten Commandments, which is the heart of Israel's covenant relationship with God. And one of the most important points he made was that the law was not given as a way to save yourself, or as a ladder with ten rungs for making your way up to God; rather the Ten Commandments established the framework for Israel's joyful response to the God who has *already* saved them. They tell us not how to be saved, but how to live as a saved people. Salvation and grace came *before* the law was given. God didn't show up in Egypt and say to Israel, 'here's my law; keep these commandments well enough and I'll come back and get you out.' He saved them first, by his grace, for his glory, in fulfillment of his promises to Abraham. And only after that does he bring them to Sinai and make his covenant with them, including instructions to live by.

So the Ten Commandments provide Israel with a framework, with authoritative principles for how to live as God's saved, covenant people. Every rule of God serves a purpose and expresses a principle. God's laws are not random; he's not on a power trip issuing laws just because he can. His laws serve a purpose; they express principles. As Travis summarized last week, for the Ten Commandments, the two big principles are the right regard for God and right relationships with each other. More specifically, we see the principles of God's uniqueness, exclusivity, holiness, worthiness, and authority. That's what's behind the rules in commands 1-4. And you see the principles of human dignity and respect—the right for parents to be honored, for people's lives and property and marriages and reputations to be protected. That's what's behind commands 5-10.

But how are those principles to be applied in everyday life for God's covenant people? For instance, if you think of the principle that we should respect people's property, what does that look like when I'm in your house? How do I apply that principle to that situation? I need to know the *house rules*. Am I supposed to take off my shoes at the door? Do I need to use a coaster for the coffee table? I believe strongly in protecting your property, but I need to know the rules for how to do that here.

The Book of the Covenant (along with additional collection of laws throughout the Pentateuch) specify the house rules for Israel—how to put the Ten Commandments into practice in daily life within their covenant relationship with God. They help Israel understand the relevance of God's law and how to apply it. God spells it out here.

Now we call it the Book of the Covenant because that's what Moses calls it in ch. 24:7. It's a large chunk, stretching all the way from 20:22 to 23:33 (we didn't read the whole thing earlier). But it's one big section with one common purpose, and so I want to cover it together. It breaks down into five parts:

- Instructions for the proper worship of Yahweh (20:23-26)
- Instructions for the protection of people's lives (21:1-32)
- Instructions for the protection of people's property (21:33-22:14)
- Instructions for the proper respect of the other, including God, neighbor, and even creation (22:16-23:19)
- Promises and instructions about inheriting the land (23:20-33)

When we look at the introduction to this collection in ch. 20:22, we notice two things: it's distinct from the Ten Commandments, but not disconnected. The Book of the Covenant is distinct in that, while God himself spoke the Ten Commandments audibly from heaven, these laws are given to Israel through Moses. Verse 22: "And the LORD said to Moses, 'Thus you shall say to the people of Israel . . .'" It's distinct. But it's *not disconnected*. In fact, God's declaration of the Ten Commandments is the basis for why Israel should obey this additional set of laws. "'Thus you shall say to the people of Israel: 'You have seen for yourselves that I have talked with you from heaven.'" Therefore, obey. The Book of the Covenant flows directly out of the Ten Commandments.

More than that, nearly every instruction in the Book can be directly linked to at least one of the Ten Commandments. Again, these are the house rules for how to take the general principles expressed in the Ten Commandments and apply them to specific life situations in ancient Israel.

So for instance, in the first section on instructions for proper worship (20:23-26) there is a principle rooted in the first and second commandments ("You shall have no other gods before me. You shall not make for yourself a carved image . . ." 20:3-6). That principle is the *uniqueness, exclusivity, and holiness of Yahweh*, Israel's God. So what does it look like to put that principle into practice in daily worship? How does Israel apply the first and second commandments to daily life? Chapter 20:23: "You shall not make gods of silver to be with me, nor shall you make for yourselves gods of gold." If you do that, you deny Yahweh's uniqueness and exclusivity. Or what happens when an Israelite breaks that commandment? Chapter 22:20: "Whoever sacrifices to any god, other than the LORD alone, shall be devoted to destruction." The regulations are applying a bigger principle—the uniqueness and holiness of God.

Another important principle expressed in several of the Ten Commandments is *the dignity of all human life*. What are the house rules for protecting the life of the other? That's what the second section in 21:1-32 is all about. Which strikes us as odd at first, when you realize that the first eleven verses there about how to treat male and female slaves. That doesn't exactly sound like protecting human life. Especially when we read the word "slave" and think of the atrocities of slavery in our own national history.

Slavery among ancient Israel was quite different; it was voluntary, for instance, and temporary (21:1-11, cf. 21:16). But what's most striking is that slaves were protected by the law. The instructions given here are designed to *protect the slave from their master* (cf. 21:20-21, 26-27). Now why God gave instructions for restraining evil within a dehumanizing institution, rather than abolishing the institution itself, I'm not sure. But the principle for protecting the life of the other is clear, and there are house rules for what that looks like.

Similarly, you have laws about consequences for violent actions in 21:12-33. We read v. 23, "But if there is harm, then you shall pay life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth . . ." (21:23-25) and think 'how barbaric.' But the purpose here is to preserve and promote justice; to make sure the punishment does not exceed the crime. Don't require someone's life if they only knocked out your tooth. And don't let a rich man get off paying a fine when he takes someone else's life. House rules for protecting the dignity of human life.

The third section in 21:33-22:14, with its instructions for protecting people's property, is basically an extended commentary on the eighth commandment, "You shall not steal" (Exod.

20:15). So what happens when someone does steal? Well, according to 22:1, “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.” Or v. 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.”

In the fourth section (22:16-23:19), we find applications of several different commandments. For instance, what does it look like to obey the ninth commandment, “You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor” (20:16)? 23:1-3: “You shall not spread a false report. You shall not join hands with a wicked man to be a malicious witness. 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.”

You get the picture. The Book of the Covenant shows how the Ten Commandments are relevant to everyday life in Israel. They provide house rules for how to apply and obey the principles of the Ten Commandments in the context of Israel’s covenant relationship with God.

So how do we obey them today? Or should we? What do we do with the Old Testament law?

The End of the Law: Fulfilling the Law through Christ

Whereas Paul was clearly correct to say that we are not under law, but under grace (Rom. 6:14), Jesus was also clearly correct when he said he came not to abolish the law, but to fulfill it (Matt. 5:17). Moreover, both Jesus and Paul regularly talk about the importance of fulfilling the law, usually in terms of Jesus’ great summary of the whole law in just two commandments: love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, and mind, and love your neighbor as yourself (Matt. 22:34-40; cf. Rom. 13:8-10; Gal. 5:13-14; 6:2).

So the Old Testament law remains relevant. And there is a sense in which it is sometimes binding on God’s people today. But there’s also a sense in which not all of it is binding, and sorting out that distinction is what often gives us a headache. Are we merely left with our own opinions? That was one of A.J. Jacob’s conclusions in his “year of living biblically”—“thou shalt pick and choose.” Everyone does it, even those who claim to take the Bible literally. And so pick the ones that you like, and ignore the rest.

But I think we can and must say more than that. Remember how the law worked for ancient Israel: there was a principle (the uniqueness of God, the dignity of people) that was expressed in a rule or regulation (have no other gods before me; do not steal; if a man steals an ox, he shall repay five oxen for an ox). What we see in Scripture is that the principles remain; they are God’s abiding Word to all people in all time. The *regulations* are what sometimes change—the house rules—because the house has changed: we are no longer living under the old covenant given at Sinai; now that Jesus has come, we live under the new covenant in Christ.

Principles can be expressed in different ways through different rules. The principle of protecting property might mean removing shoes when someone comes inside your house; we don’t have that rule in our home. You can’t play with fire inside our house, or rip the cupboard doors off the hinges. But shoes are okay. The principle remains, but the question is: whose house are we in?

Now that Jesus has come, we are no longer in the house of Israel's old covenant. We are in what the Bible calls a new covenant in Christ. The Old Testament promised it (e.g. Jer. 31:31-34; Ezek. 34:25-31); the covenant God made with Israel at Sinai wasn't meant to be eternal. It was designed to point people forward to Christ (see Gal. 3:15-29; Heb. 7-10). The New Testament shows us how Jesus established this new covenant through his life, death, and resurrection. He perfectly obeyed the rules and regulations of the first covenant in his sinless life (e.g. Matt. 3:15; 5:17; 1 Pet. 2:22); he became the faithful representative of all Israel. More than that, he took upon himself the full consequences for all who broke God's covenant through his death on the cross, ratifying the new covenant with his own blood (Lk. 22:20). And he did this not just for Israel, but for all nations. As Paul explains in Galatians 3:13-14, "Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us—for it is written, 'Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree'—so that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we might receive the promised Spirit through faith."

Because Jesus fulfilled the old covenant with Israel, and in fulfilling it established a new covenant in his own body and blood, for all nations, we live in *his* house, under his house rules. The abiding principles of the law must therefore be filtered and obeyed through Christ.

That's how we know what to obey or how to apply the Old Testament laws we find in the Book of the Covenant. It's not up to us to pick in choose. We can't just ignore it; nor can we obey everything exactly as it's prescribed. We must filter those laws through Christ. God's law is relevant to all of life for his treasured people, but it must be applied today through Christ who fulfilled it and who frees us to keep it by the Spirit.

So think of Jesus as the filter. When you run liquid through a filter, some things are going to pass straight through; some things are going to be absorbed, and some things are going to be strained out. The same thing happens to the regulations of the Old Testament law.

Some rules and regulations *pass straight through*. They are just as binding today as they were for Israel under the Sinai covenant. The clearest marker for this is when the New Testament repeats a command straight out of the law. For instance, "love your neighbor as yourself": it's first stated in Leviticus 19:34, and it's reiterated in Matthew 19, 22, Romans 13, Galatians 5, James 2. That is a binding rule for the people of God today; it passes straight through the filter of Christ and comes directly to us. Or God's instructions about sex and marriage—that sex is for marriage, and marriage is for a man and a woman. The New Testament says the same thing as the Old—because both are rooted in the principle of God's design for creation (Lev. 18:22; 20:13; cf. Rom. 1:26-27; 1 Cor. 6:9-10; 1 Tim. 1:8-11; Matt. 19:4-6; Gen. 1:27; 2:18-24).

Or how nine out of the Ten Commandments are repeated in the New Testament—they come straight through to us. The only one not repeated is the law about keeping the Sabbath (cf. Col. 2:16; Rom. 14:5). But even then, though the specific regulation about how to keep the Sabbath is not binding for church, the principle remains—the principle that we are to order our lives around God our Creator and Savior. The whole purpose of setting aside a day for rest and worship was to recognize and remember that God is the center of the universe, not us. That's still true today, though there is more flexibility in the New Testament about how we apply that.

So some laws and regulations pass straight through the filter of Christ. Others are *absorbed by Christ*. They are fulfilled so completely by Christ in his life, death, and resurrection that they are

no longer passed on to the people of God. They become, as the author of Hebrews puts it, “obsolete” (Heb. 8:13). Many of the laws about Israel’s worship fall into this category. All the instructions about sacrifices and offerings in Exodus and Leviticus, the rules for the priesthood, for the altars and the temple—all of those were fulfilled by Jesus so completely that they no longer apply. Hebrews describes it like this:

And every priest stands daily at his service, offering repeatedly the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins. But when Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God, waiting from that time until his enemies should be made a footstool for his feet. For by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified. (Heb. 10:11-14).

Again, the principle behind the laws remains—the forgiveness of sins still requires a blood sacrifice. We still need a mediator in order to approach God. It’s just that that sacrifice has been paid in full by our perfect mediator, Jesus Christ.

So some laws pass straight through to us, some are absorbed by Christ. Finally, some laws and regulations are *strained out*.

Some of ancient Israel’s house rules were unique to the first covenant, because they emphasized the unique nature of Israel’s identity and relationship with God. They were God’s treasured possession among all nations—set apart from all other people groups to be his holy nation (Exod. 19:4-6). And so many of their laws emphasized that uniqueness. For instance, laws about not wearing clothing of two kinds of material, or planting your field with two kinds of seed—that wasn’t because God has something against crop efficiency or blended fabrics. Their clothing and farming practices were to be a reminder that they were a set-apart people—different from the nations around them. The same principle lays behind laws about clean and unclean foods. Israel made a distinction in their menu, because they were a distinct people (cf. Lev. 11:46-47). And so in the New Testament, when Peter is sent to preach the gospel to the Gentiles (non-Jews), remember the vision God gives him—“something like a great sheet descending, being let down by its four corners upon the earth. In it were all kinds of animals and reptiles and birds of the air. And there came a voice to him: ‘Rise, Peter; kill and eat.’ But Peter said, ‘By no means, Lord; for I have never eaten anything that is common or unclean.’ And the voice came to him again a second time, ‘What God has made clean, do not call common’” (Acts 10:10-15). And then he sends him to preach Christ to non-Jews. It’s no coincidence that when the gospel goes out to the Gentiles, the food laws disappear. They are strained out. The principle remains—God is holy, and elects a people for himself to be holy as he is holy (cf. 1 Pet 1:16; 2:9-10; cf. Lev. 20:26). But that election is no longer drawn along ethnic lines; it’s now marked by faith in Jesus Christ (cf. Gal. 3:7-9, 29; Rom. 9–11).

So God’s law is relevant to all of life for all his treasured people. But it must be applied today through Christ, who fulfilled the law, and who frees us to keep it by the Spirit.

And that’s the other critical difference between the old and new covenants—*the presence of the Spirit who empowers us to obey*. Israel had a really hard time keeping the rules of the old covenant. But the problem wasn’t with the rules or the law itself—it was the weakness of human flesh. As Paul describes it in Romans 7: “For while we were living in the flesh, our sinful passions, aroused by the law, were at work in our members to bear fruit for death” (7:5). The law

itself was “holy and righteous and good” (7:12), but sin took advantage of it, producing lawlessness in us, which we are powerless to fight against in the flesh, apart from Christ. But in Christ, Paul tells us, “we are released from the law, having died to that which held us captive, so that we *serve* not under the old written code but *in the new life of the Spirit*” (7:6).

God’s people are still called to serve God, but we apply the law through Christ, who frees us to keep it by the Spirit. We can’t do it in the flesh—in our own effort or ability. But we don’t need to rely on the flesh if we have Christ. As Romans 8:3-4 tells us, “For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do. By sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit.”

And so when we read Old Testament laws, like the Book of the Covenant—as obscure and awkward as some of these instructions might feel—remember: every rule of God serves a purpose and expresses a principle. Let it be your guide for loving God and loving your neighbor—recognizing God’s worthiness, uniqueness, and holiness, and honoring the dignity of every person—protecting their life, property, marriage, and reputation. Understand the purpose of each law for Israel, in the context of their covenant, and then filter that law through Christ. Does it pass through? Has it been absorbed? Has it been strained out? How do we put the principle into practice?

God gave us his law in love. May we learn to love it and keep it, not grudgingly or legalistically, but joyfully through faith in Jesus and the power of the Holy Spirit.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Opening Questions

1. When you read the laws collected in the Book of the Covenant, what’s the first thing that comes to your mind?

Questions for Study and Understanding

2. How does the introduction to the Book of the Covenant in 20:22 help us understand the relationship between the Ten Commandments and this new collection of laws?
3. What kind of life situations do the laws seem to address?
4. Which laws seem like they could apply today quite easily?
5. Which laws seem outdated, foreign, or irrelevant?
6. As you read through the various laws in this collection, what principles do the commands seem to be expressing?
7. How would you describe the main point of the Book of the Covenant?

Questions for Reflection and Application

When Jesus came, he established a new covenant with God's people, which replaced the old covenant given to Israel at Mount Sinai (cf. Jer. 31:31-34; Luke 22:15-20; 2 Cor. 3:1-18; Heb. 8-10). God's law remains relevant to all of life for his treasured people, but it must now be applied through Christ who fulfilled it and who frees us to keep it by the Spirit. This means filtering the laws in the Book of the Covenant through Christ.

8. What laws in the Book of the Covenant likely pass through the filter and come to God's people today?
9. What laws are absorbed by Christ, having been so completely fulfilled in his life, death, and resurrection, that we are no longer required to keep them?
10. What laws seem to be strained out, having been tied to Israel's unique but temporary covenant situation?
11. What are some ways the Book of the Covenant helps you love God and love others?