

May 27, 2018

The Heart of the Torah

Exodus 22:21-27; Deuteronomy 24:17-22

For nearly two months we have explored the Torah – the first five books of the Hebrew Bible – and the story told there: about how the people of Israel were cruelly oppressed slaves in Egypt, and cried out to the Lord, who heard their cry and sent Moses to bring the people out. We have followed their story and seen God’s protection for them as they made their way through a desert to the land that God had promised their ancestors. It is the foundational story of the Jewish faith and one of the foundational stories of our own. But those five books aren’t just story. They are called the *Torah*, which means, “instruction” or “law.” These are the books of the Law, and so as we complete this series, I want to spend a day on that side of the Torah.

Which is hard. Oh, there’s some great stuff in the law. You know about the Ten Commandments, for instance. But they’re one tiny part of the Torah’s law codes, and the rest of it is often, um, puzzling. Those of you who have tried to read through the Bible probably got bogged down right there, in the laws of the Torah, and may have even come away thinking, “Really? *This* is scripture? God inspired *this*?” There are laws, for instance, that mean zero to us today: temple instructions and dress codes and dietary guidelines. Other laws are head-scratchingly inexplicable, like rules against mixed grain bread or blended fabrics. Some are just absurd. There’s a law, for instance, telling what to do if a woman steps in to break up a fight between her husband and another man and accidentally touches the other man’s privates. This happened a lot, did it? Moreover, when you read history, you discover that many laws were plagiarized nearly word-for-word from earlier law codes – the Code of Hammurabi, the laws of Esh-nunna, and so on. And finally, some of the laws are simply repellent to us: laws affirming slavery, for instance, or laws condemning homosexuality, or laws that explicitly assign a lower value to women than to men. In short, much of the law in the Torah is not only hard to understand, but problematic when you do understand it.

But then you run across a passage like this. We read Exodus 22, verses 21-27:

²¹You shall not wrong or oppress a resident alien, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt. ²²You shall not abuse any widow or orphan. ²³If you do abuse them, when they cry out to me, I will surely heed their cry; ²⁴my wrath will burn, and I will kill you with the sword, and your wives shall become widows and your children orphans.

²⁵ If you lend money to my people, to the poor among you, you shall not deal with them as a creditor; you shall not exact interest from them. ²⁶If you take your neighbor’s cloak in pawn, you shall restore it before the sun goes down; ²⁷for it may be your neighbor’s only clothing to use as cover; in what else shall that person sleep? And if your neighbor cries out to me, I will listen, for I am compassionate.

In the first sermon in this series on the Exodus, I offered a definition of God – God’s own self-identification to Moses – as the One who hears the cry of the oppressed. That identification is reinforced in this passage and extended to God’s people. “I am the One who hears the cry of the oppressed; you pay attention to them, too.”

Some background. At that time, there were no food stamps, no disability payments, no Social Security or unemployment insurance programs. All that fell to the family. It was the task

of the family to care for the aged, the infirm, and the down-and-out. But what about those who didn't have that protection? What about foreigners living in the land, whose family was far away? What about widows, or orphans – people whose natural protectors had died? Here God says, “You will not oppress them, abuse them or in any way take advantage of their helplessness. Instead, you will *all* help them. If they need money, you will lend to them, and charge no interest. And if you take a pledge on your loan, you will not take something that they need. You will treat the immigrant, the widow, and the orphan fairly and kindly, and if you don't, and if they cry out to me, remember that *I am the One who hears the cry of the oppressed.*”

There are a couple of things that make this passage stand out from the rest of the law. First of all, remember I said that much of the law seemed to be borrowed from other Ancient Near Eastern codes? Well, there's nothing like this anywhere else. The laws devaluing women and accepting slavery and specifying sexuality all have parallels elsewhere in other law codes. But this section demanding compassion for the helpless is unique. But there's something even more strikingly different about this passage. Everywhere else in the law, God tells the Israelite judges how to punish a law-breaker. If someone steals an ox, you will make him return the ox with interest. If someone talks back to his parents, you will stone him to death. That sort of thing. But notice that in this passage, God does not tell Israel how to punish the person who oppresses the helpless. God says, “I'll deal with that person myself. If you abuse a widow or orphan or immigrant, *my wrath will burn.*” Suddenly, this gets very real. God pulls back the curtain and speaks directly. “If you oppress the weak, I will hear their cry, and I will destroy you. Do you hear my words?”

And a third thing that distinguishes this law is that God keeps coming back to it. We read now Deuteronomy 24:17-22:

¹⁷ You shall not deprive a resident alien or an orphan of justice; you shall not take a widow's garment in pledge. ¹⁸Remember that you were a slave in Egypt and the Lord your God redeemed you from there; therefore I command you to do this. ¹⁹When you reap your harvest in your field and forget a sheaf in the field, you shall not go back to get it; it shall be left for the alien, the orphan, and the widow, so that the Lord your God may bless you in all your undertakings. ²⁰When you beat your olive trees, do not strip what is left; it shall be for the alien, the orphan, and the widow. ²¹When you gather the grapes of your vineyard, do not glean what is left; it shall be for the alien, the orphan, and the widow. ²²Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt; therefore I am commanding you to do this.

This passage not only commands Israel to care for the helpless but gives specifics on how to do so. They are to share their excess. If you have a field that bears a good crop so that you have more than enough, leave some of it behind when you reap. The same with your vineyards and olive trees. Don't strip them bare; leave some for those who have nothing. Israel is instructed to assume that if they have extra, at least a part of that extra is for those who have nothing. Now, it's not a handout. The poor still have to gather the food for themselves. But the Israelites are to make sure there's something for those who are hungry to gather.

I want to point out one more thing from this passage. Twice Moses offers this motivation for caring for the down-and-out, *Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt.* Do not forget what it feels like to be helpless. We saw this in our earlier reading, too. Exodus 22:21 says, *You shall not wrong or oppress a resident alien, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt.* We are to help the helpless not just out of fear of God's wrath, but out of empathy. We

are to help the foreigner because we, too, have been out of place. We are to feed the hungry, because we too have known hunger. God designed us with a capacity to empathize with others and expects us to use it.

Last Thursday, we finished an eight-week survey of the entire Bible. In that study, we looked for the themes that tie the Bible together as a whole, and one of those themes that we saw over and over was that God chose to work through insignificant people, the ones who had few privileges in society: younger sons, refugees, slaves, women, foreigners, children, outcasts, people with evident symptoms of mental illness, and people with handicaps. And when God chose to work through an entire nation, God chose a nation of slaves. God is either unwilling or unable to use wealthy, important, powerful, successful people. This, I believe, is why: Empathy. Privilege and wealth dulls a person's empathy, and God wants to work with people who can empathize with others.

The law codes of the Torah can feel like a hot mess. They are often confusing, and when they aren't confusing, they are often off-putting. So I'm delighted to remind you that, according to our New Testament, we are no longer bound to the law. We are joined to God by a new covenant, a covenant of grace and mercy. We don't have to avoid pork or shellfish. We can eat 12-grain bread, if we really want to, for some reason. We don't have to stone our teenagers when they talk back – in fact, we discourage it. We also no longer approve of slavery, no longer think that women are less valuable knockoffs of men, and we no longer feel bound to the law's pronouncements on gender roles and sexuality. *But* that doesn't mean the law has no value. The specific rules may or may not apply today, but the core principles behind the law remain a powerful witness to the heart of God. These core principles include the Ten Commandments, but just as certainly they include today's passages. You will help the helpless, because you know what it is to be helpless. You will bring deliverance to those who are trapped behind walls of poverty, addiction, or depression, because you yourself were once slaves who have been set free by God.

It's about empathy. It's about seeing others' needs, recognizing them, and acting. Last Sunday, at our Pancake Breakfast a man peeked in one of the windows, then turned to walk away. One of our men saw him and followed. The stranger wore multiple layers of clothes and carried a bag of aluminum cans. Our member called after him, "Are you hungry?" He was. So we fed him. You fed him. He thanked us, declined a second helping, took up his bag of cans and went on. It was a simple thing. We had food, and he needed it. But that simple thing, believe it or not, is the heart of the Torah.