

## **“Put it in Writing: Moses”**

*Reading: Exodus 20:1-17; 1 Corinthians 1:18-25*

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What would you do if you were the last person on earth? Or what if there was a complete breakdown of human society, a nuclear apocalypse or a zombie plague, and laws and governments and militaries and police forces and all the other trappings of civilization are gone? No rules, just do whatever you want to do to survive, because who is going to stop you? Would you go wild, looting and destroying? Would you find what survivors you could, and try to rebuild some rudimentary society? It's a question that gets asked a lot in movies and TV shows and books, because it allows us to wrestle with some of the realities of human nature. Some people like the thought of checking out of civilized society. Some people feel constrained by rules and expectations, and they'd much rather just be on their own and do things as they please. For them, a post-apocalyptic world free from society's rules might be a bit of a fantasy.

Some people take it even further and suggest that civilization is really the problem, and if we could just get back to the primitive, uncorrupted way of life of our ancient ancestors, everything would be fine. It's the idea of the “noble savage,” that people are inherently good and it's society that corrupts them. It's a sentimentalized and sometimes racist caricature in literature of simple, happy, untroubled people living off in the jungle somewhere. And it's an idea that we still toy with today, in different ways. We have diets today that tell you to eat like a caveman, and you'll never get cancer, thinking that modernity is the root of our health problems. Of course, that assumption ignores the fact that the reason cavemen didn't get cancer is because they died of something else before they were thirty. Or there are those who insist that it would be best if government was practically nonexistent, and the world would be better if we could all just do what we wanted with no interference. Of course, that assumption ignores the horrible realities of places like Somalia, where we can see in real time what it's like with no government intrusion.

When it comes down to it, probably not many of us would really want to live in a world without the benefits of modern civilization. But just as we can see the loneliness and brutality and threats to survival in an uncivilized world, we also have to admit that civilization is not without its problems. Some people fantasize about living in total freedom, but others just wish that there could be a few *more* laws keeping everyone in line. Why can't we just legislate some of our views on good, traditional, Judeo-Christian morality? Nobody's calling for complete government control; we don't want fascism, but it might be nice to have some laws in place protecting some of the moral viewpoints that we treasure. But there are flaws in this position, too. Civilization with its laws and controls are a big step up from anarchy, but you can't legislate morality. Laws are not about morality, they're about maintaining order; you can't change someone's heart with a law. And so we still have problems in civilization: we've had terrible wars, and we've had laws that have institutionalized slavery and sexism and racism, and we've had entire civilizations wipe out other entire civilizations.

And so we're caught. We feel trapped by our civilization, and we long for true freedom, but we really know that our hearts are not pure enough to be able to handle life without some controls in place. We need our civilization and our laws and our government, but we feel stifled sometimes. And that's how it's been for thousands of years: nations and people experiment with their civilizations, sometimes building them up, sometimes tearing them down, and we continue to struggle.

And into that chaos and confusion comes the word of God. The Ten Commandments are particularly the word of God. The text emphasizes that fact. They're just part of a body of law given by God, made up of 613 commandments, but the rest of those laws are mediated through Moses. The other laws begin with this: "The Lord said to Moses, 'Tell the Israelites this...'" But the Ten Commandments begin with "God spoke all these words." These words are the core of the law, the centerpiece in a unique covenant that God is making with a nation of people. He's speaking these words to a group of people who have just come out from under the crushing heel of absolute subjugation and slavery, and now they're faced with the uncertainty of absolute freedom. They've been slaves for generations, and now they have to try to build a society from the ground up.

These words of God come into a world that is very different than our world today, but in many ways the same. Many of the struggles were the same. Most people probably lived in loosely-knit villages and tribes scattered throughout the world, desperately trying to survive from year to year, hoping, in most cases, that the mysterious gods and spirits would look favorably on them. In some places, like Egypt, people lived in authoritarian civilizations ruled by great god-kings and priests. But God had a different plan, a plan to carve out of the chaos a people for Himself, characterized by an enduring relationship of blessing and faithfulness. And so He made a covenant with them.

We've seen in these last couple of weeks of Lent that God has made covenants with His creation before this. He made a covenant with Noah and the whole world after the terrible flood, a covenant to prove that God is good even in terrible times. He made a covenant with Abraham to bring a nation of people out of Abraham and Sarah, even though they were long past childbearing years, and that covenant showed that God had a plan to be involved in the future of His creation. He was not abandoning us, and He would not keep His distance. And here we see the next phase of God's plan: here the descendants of Abraham and Sarah have grown into a huge nation, but they have fallen into slavery and are far from the land God had promised them, and He is making a covenant with this nation of stiff-necked former slaves to be their God if they will be His people. This is a covenant to guide them and craft them from a rabble into a people identified by relationship with the one true God, and the covenant outlines how they can live as His people.

This is a covenant that shows us that God cares about how we construct our societies and how we conduct ourselves. God is not merely benign, and He does not merely have a plan for all of creation, He has a plan to be deeply involved in how we live our lives. His words inject a glimpse of a redeemed creation into our muddled lives by showing us God's priorities. Sometimes we think of commandments like these as rules imposed on us by a controlling God who just wants to ruin our fun, because God has nothing better to do than force us to do things. Maybe we're so morally weak that we need someone watching us all the time in order to prevent us from doing terrible things, and that's the role God is filling. But no, these commandments are pointing us in the direction of a good and beautiful creation, a community that is one more step along the way toward redemption.

It would be worth it sometime to go through each of the commandments in detail, because there's a lot of treasure to be uncovered here. But on a general level, it's often pointed out that the first few of the Ten Commandments deal with your relationship with God, and the latter Commandments have to do with relationships between humans. Both parts have to be in place for God's people to be the redeemed community He intends. It begins with the foundational claim that

the Lord is God, and there are no other gods to be worshipped other than Him. Other nations worship lesser things in place of God; we do not. In the time of Moses, the temptation was to worship animal gods or storm gods or fertility gods, but now the temptation is to worship money or family or country or work or pleasure instead of God. We rarely make physical idols, but we regularly devote our time and our adoration to idolatrous pursuits. God wants us to be His, and His alone.

And to that end, His authority and His ways are to be recognized. His name is not to be taken lightly. The thrust of that commandment mostly has to do with taking an oath in the Lord's name, or with proclaiming a curse on someone in the Lord's name. The idea is that the Lord's name is holy enough that we are not to appropriate it for our uses or use it to invoke God for our bidding. His name is to be praised or called upon in times of need, but not taken lightly. And likewise, we are called to structure our time in a way that honors Him as well. He writes the Sabbath into this covenant, taking one out of every seven days as a day of rest and worship, a gift of our time to God that is also a gift of rest for us, as we remember God's goodness and provision in creation. It's a powerful statement that we trust God and that we will be marked as His. We do this because, as He begins by saying, "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery." God reveals Himself to us, and He saves us.

And just as we recognize the Lord's authority over and provision for us, we also recognize the Lord's authority and provision for those around us. God has not only covenanted with me, He has covenanted with a whole kingdom of people, and so if I'm going to live in right relationship with Him, I also have to live in right relationship with others who bear His image. I'm not going to deprive my neighbor of something that God has given him or her, like life or property or truth. I'm not going to dishonor what God has given me and what God has given you by fostering a greed within my heart for something of yours. It seems so insignificant to envy, because it's just within me; who's getting hurt by it? But envy distrusts what God has given me and wants to deprive you of what God has given you.

I skipped the one about honoring your parents, which always seemed a little out of place to me. I mean, it's good advice, but why does God take the time in the Ten Commandments to tell kids to obey their parents? But that's not really the thrust of the commandment, though children *should* obey their parents. It's addressed to adults as much as children: honor your parents even when you're grown and they're advanced in years. This is one of God's ways of providing for those who are vulnerable in His society. Rather than being cast aside, the elderly are to be honored by younger generations.

And so the problem that our societies have faced for thousands of years is not that they have had too little law or too much law, too small governments or too large governments, the problem is that the race of humanity has rejected the lordship of God and has refused to trust His ways. That goes much deeper than just following a list of rules. You can follow the letter of the law but miss the spirit. It's interesting to me that in American Christianity in recent decades, the Ten Commandments have been mostly used as a touchstone for a cultural battle: we file lawsuits about having monuments to the Ten Commandments set up in courthouses, and the goal, really, is to declare allegiance to a set of conservative American ideals. It's using the Ten Commandments as yet another salvo in our ongoing culture war. In reality, though, this covenant is intended to form a new people for God: we submit to God's word, rather than using God's word for our ends.

In this season of Lent especially, we need to be keenly aware of the fact that God's covenants with His people are not lists of rules for us to follow; they are instead calls to trust in the character and authority of our God and Lord, and form our lives and our societies around His call. No one can be a good person purely by following the rules, no matter how long your list of rules is. No, what is needed is to bow your heart and your life before God. Paul says in 1 Corinthians that the message God has given us sounds so foolish to those who think themselves wise. God reveals His greatest power, His deepest love, and His brightest glory by the self-giving death of Jesus on the cross for us. We do not preach a list of rules to follow. We do not preach a God to be lived in fear of. We preach Christ crucified, the means for us to respond in faith and truly bow our hearts and lives before God.



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