

Message Outline

Fill in the Gap between Abrahamic Promise & God's Covenant with Israel

- We've been going through this series called, "God's Big Story" and we're taking a birds eye view of scripture so that whenever we read it, we'll have a better grasp on the context of whatever it is that we're reading.
- We're gonna have some fun today (at least, I'm into it) but first, I want to get you caught up on where we're at in our series.
- Last time Kory preached, he shared about God's covenant with Abraham and the promise of descendants more numerous than the stars that he could see at night.
- Today we're talking about the nation of Israel and the Law, God's covenant with the Israelite people. So, how did we go from Abraham to God giving Israel the law? Well, here it is.
- Abraham's grandson is Jacob which means Israel. From Jacob's sons come the 12 tribes of Israel
- One of Jacob's sons, Joseph, is hated by all the rest. They're jealous of him – they sell him to slave traders and he's brought to Egypt where he eventually ends up in prison.
- Joseph interprets pharaoh's dreams while in prison, which ends up protecting Egypt from a severe famine. In turn, Joseph is made, second in command by pharaoh.
- So Joseph's family finds out he's still alive and they come to Egypt and enjoy the favor of the people

Exodus 1 tells us

⁶In time, Joseph and all of his brothers died, ending that entire generation. ⁷But their descendants, the Israelites, had many children and grandchildren. In fact, they multiplied so greatly that they became extremely powerful and filled the land.

⁸Eventually, a new king came to power in Egypt who knew nothing about Joseph or what he had done. ⁹He said to his people, "Look, the people of Israel now outnumber us and are stronger than we are. ¹⁰We must make a plan to keep them from growing even more...

¹¹So the Egyptians made the Israelites their slaves...

This fulfills God's promise to Abraham that's found in [Genesis 15:13-14](#)

¹³Then the LORD said to Abram, "You can be sure that your descendants will be strangers in a foreign land, where they will be oppressed as slaves for 400 years. ¹⁴But I will punish the nation that enslaves them, and in the end they will come away with great wealth

And so after 400 years of slavery, Egypt is punished with a series of plagues, and Moses leads the Israelites into the desert.

And then you get to the point in the Bible where many of us struggle to actually get through. Right? We've all done it. "I'm gonna read through the Bible this year!" And we read through Genesis and get half way through Exodus and then all of the sudden we start reading these Old Testament Laws. Laws about purity and laws about worship and laws about society. And there's about 611 Dos and Don'ts in

the Old Testament. And some of the stuff is uncomfortable or even disturbing. Like this passage we find in Deuteronomy 25:11-12.

¹¹ “If two men, a man and his countryman, are struggling together, and the wife of one comes near to deliver her husband from the hand of the one who is striking him, and puts out her hand and seizes his genitals, (The King James Version says “Taketh him by the secrets.”) ¹² then you shall cut off her hand; you shall not show pity.

Does that sound extreme to anyone else? Barbaric maybe?

But I mean, c’mon. A man gets into a fight, and his wife wants to rescue her husband, so what’s she do? I mean this is exactly what we train young women to do in self-defense class. If you’re a woman and you need to overpower a man - taketh him by the secrets. Right?

And you’ll read through the Psalms and David will say things like

“The law of the Lord is perfect, refreshing the soul.”

And you’re thinking – what books was David reading?

And to make matters worse – some of the laws you read are duplicates. So you get through Exodus and you’re like, “Oh Good, I made it.” But then you start reading Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy and every time you get through a book you think, “Oh, I’m not out of the woods yet?”

And that’s the Torah – the First five books of the Bible. And the last four of those books detail God’s law or God’s covenant with the Israelites. He’s freed them from Egypt and He’s making them into a special people.

The Question for us today is – What exactly is the law and what are we supposed to do with it?

Remember the verse we mentioned earlier, the one some of you are trying to forget?

So let’s take a moment to talk about this text. There’s three things that I want you to consider about this passage. And they’re good principals for you to consider when you read through the Old Testament and come across a passage that you find troubling.

- 1) Consider other passages that are like it. See, at face value, it contradicts other old testament laws like “Eye for an Eye” and “tooth for a tooth.” So even knowing the surrounding scriptures here, helps us to at the very least question a literal reading of this passage. It causes us to pause and recognize that we might be missing something.
- 2) Investigate the language. The truth is, sometimes ancient Hebrew can be difficult to translate. Look at the passage.

¹¹ “If two men, a man and his countryman, are struggling together, and the wife of one comes near to deliver her husband from the **hand** of the one who is striking him, and puts out her **hand** and seizes his genitals, ¹² then you shall cut off her **hand**; you shall not show pity.

Notice it uses the word “hand” three times. Or does it? Actually, in the Hebrew it’s more literally saying something like: puts out her hand and seizes his genitals, then you shall cut off her palm.

Now, it's strange right? How do you cut off a palm? Why stop using the word "hand" and prefer a more confusing word instead. You break the clear parallel and you confuse the reader.

That word palm could also refer to her groin so the implication might be – this woman tried to prevent a man and potentially his wife from being able to procreate so she should no longer qualify for the levirate marriage that was discussed in the preceding verses.

So, first, consider other passages like it. Is there anything that sheds light on what I'm reading?

Next, look at the language. Does anything suggest that this verse is hard to translate?

Here's the third: **Consider the culture**. The culture is foreign to us and that means that plenty gets lost in translation.

Take for example that for early Jews – having descendants, carrying on your family name, was for some, their idea of salvation – it's how they lived forever. It also eventually became one their highest hopes that the messiah would be from their bloodline. Additionally, if your genitals were crushed, you were no longer allowed to be a part of the worshipping community. This was a serious offense. An attack on someone's eternal future. It's not about punishing impropriety.

And here's another key cultural component: Most rabbis and the earliest Jewish commentaries we have on this passage understood it to be saying, "She must pay the redemption price for her hand." In other words, figure out a fair price for her hand and charge her that amount of money as a fine.

Now this is an interesting phenomenon that we need to keep in mind when we read Old Testament Law. For every crime except intentional murder, you could pay a ransom price for your life or your body part in the case of "eye for an eye" laws.

For example, take a verse like, Leviticus 20:9 "Anyone who curses their father or mother is to be put to death..."

The son or daughter who did the cursing, isn't killed – they have to pay a ransom price or redemption price for their life. Say, 30 silver coins.

And maybe you're thinking, "Well, I wish the Bible was a little more clear."

Fair enough but this reflects the language of the time. It was clear to the people it was written to. They're highlighting the seriousness of the offense while also highlighting the grace and mercy that you're shown when you only end up paying a fine instead. And by the way, your community could pay your fine with you if you weren't able to afford it. Sin and redemption became a community experience.

Jesus does something similar: "If your eye causes you to sin, gouge it out." It's classic rabbinic hyperbole. He's not expecting or even wanting people to gouge out their eyes – he's highlighting the seriousness of the offense.

That's just one law. And I use it to show you that sometimes we miss important context clues within the text, sometimes we miss important language nuances, and sometimes we miss key cultural knowledge that completely reorients a passage.

In fact, A scholar named Joshua Berman. Wrote a book called "Created Equal." And in it he shows how the social order proposed by the laws of the Torah was recognizable to Israel's neighbors - ancient

Babylonians and Canaanites, but a total ethical revolution towards a greater form of social equality. In other words – the Old Testament law was radically progressive and undermined the ethics of the day. If you want to gain an appreciation for Old Testament Law – the way that David does when he says, “the law is perfect, refreshing the soul” read this book.

But the bigger question is still – **what is the Law?** And how we understand this will further our ability to read the law well.

The Old Testament Law **was not a legal code.**

Check this out.

“Of the many thousands of Mesopotamian legal documents in our possession, not one of them cites the Code of Hammurabi, or any other ‘code’ as a source of authority. This in spite of the fact that the code of Hammurabi was esteemed and recopied for more than a millennium. All of this suggests that ancient near eastern law codes were of a literary, educational, and monumental nature, rather than legal and juridical.” (Joshua Berman, *Created Equal*: 84)

So this comes from the guys over at the Bible Project. And they’ve got a couple great podcasts on the Law and in quite a few of them they discuss this fact – the Law in scripture wasn’t used in legal cases. Judges weren’t referring back to the Law in order to best determine the right punishments or consequences.

So, if the Law isn’t a legal code to direct court rulings, what is it?

They’re illustrative examples.

We mentioned before that there are only 611 laws in the Old Testament. It’d be near impossible to run a society on just 611 laws. Did you know, no one knows how many laws America has? The number is considered to be uncountable. Just as an example – from 2000 to 2007 Congress enacted 452 new criminal offenses. 7 years, 452 new laws pertaining to criminal offenses alone. You can’t run a society off of only 611 laws.

Here’s one more piece of evidence to this idea. The Hebrew language assigns a numerical value to their letters. And the word “Torah” has a numerical value of 611. Here’s the point of all this: Only some of Israel’s laws were selected to be included in the Torah. It can’t possibly be their only laws. And consider how specific the laws are sometimes. If you were really trying to have a simplistic law code, you’d keep your laws vague and overarching. You wouldn’t detail very specific scenarios. Like, “If two men are fighting and the wife of one of the men steps in to rescue her husband... like our first thought is... why was this happening so often that they needed to make a law for this exact instance. I’ve never once seen anything like that happening today. And the answer is... it probably wasn’t happening that often. It’s just an illustration. So the law taught people about wisdom and justice and morality but they weren’t to be used as legal code.

So we’ve moved into the second part of this message which is: **Why did God give us the law?** I want to share with you, what I believe to be the top three reasons.

1) Love.

God gave the Israelites his law because He loved them. The covenant law of the Israelites can also be understood as a sort of marriage between God and His people. The covenant detailed the expectations of the relationship and it wasn't just between the ruling class and the deity of the region but this was something totally different – God had expectations and wanted a relationship with every single Israelite. They were all a part of this covenant.

But even more, we know that one of the things a loving parent does is, they create a structure, safety, and a predictable environment. Right? Why do we tell children not to touch hot ovens? Isn't it because we love them and care about them and want what's best for them? I often remind Jude – in fact we were camping this past weekend and he wanted to play with the knives in his multi-tool and I said, "I know you do. I know it looks like a lot of fun but I love you and I don't want you to get hurt and that's the only reason I can't let you do it. If it was safe, I'd love for you to be able to do it."

So In Deuteronomy 7:7 Moses reminds the people, (This passage is on two slides)

"⁷The LORD did not set his affection on you and choose you because you were more numerous than other peoples, for you were the fewest of all peoples. ⁸But it was because the LORD loved you and kept the oath he swore to your ancestors that he brought you out with a mighty hand and redeemed you from the land of slavery, from the power of Pharaoh king of Egypt. ⁹Know therefore that the LORD your God is God; he is the faithful God, keeping his covenant of love to a thousand generations of those who love him and keep his commandments."

The law is a covenant of love between God and every individual Israelite who's willing to enter into it.

2) Wisdom

God gave the Israelites His Law so that they could gain wisdom. Torah, the first 5 books of the Bible, doesn't actually mean "law" but rather, it means something closer to, "instruction." And we find that word used often in the book of proverbs. Which was, wisdom literature. You see, for the Israelites, the commands of the law were to be examples to them and so they were to use them as a sort of wisdom literature.

So you have verses like

Deuteronomy 4:5-6

⁵See, I have taught you decrees and laws as the LORD my God commanded me, so that you may follow them in the land you are entering to take possession of it. ⁶Observe them carefully, for this will show your wisdom and understanding to the nations, who will hear about all these decrees and say, "Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people."

And Deuteronomy 1:15-16 which describes the qualifications for judges and lists things like: wise and respected men who don't show partiality and aren't afraid of anyone. Again, they're not necessarily lawyers, they're not experts in the law, but they're wise. Wisdom was the key. The Law guided people in wisdom but it was also understood through wisdom. Wise Israelites discerned the law and wisdom was gained through the law.

So, let me show you an example, there's this passage in 1 Timothy 5:18 where Paul, who was one of the best Jewish scholars of his time tells the Churches to pay pastors and his reasoning was this: ¹⁸ For Scripture says, "Do not muzzle an ox while it is treading out the grain." What's Paul quoting? Deuteronomy 25:4. He's using the law as wisdom literature and extrapolating this meaning from it. And that's what Jews would've been doing with with these commands.

When Jesus is tempted by Satan in the wilderness – He responds to every temptation by quoting scripture and guess what he quotes from all three times – Deuteronomy. He's using the Law as wisdom literature.

3) Need.

The Law showed the Israelites their need. Paul, in Romans 7:7 says, "In fact, it was the law that showed me my sin. I would never have known that coveting is wrong if the law had not said, "You must not covet."

The whole sacrificial system, the law, the detailed requirements for purification – they prepare the Jewish people for understanding what ultimate redemption will be like. Even towards the end of the Old Testament you see the prophets begin to lament these continual sacrifices. It seems like the Jewish people have become content with their sin – thinking that they can offer sacrifices whenever they need to. And the prophets starts to emphasize: God doesn't need sacrifices, God's not interested in sacrifices. God desires to give you a new heart, to make you a new creation, to change you. I love Psalm 50 where God says he has cattle on a thousand hills and then goes on to say – If I were hungry, I would not tell you. And then he says, "Do I eat the meat of bulls? Do I drink the blood of goats?" In other words – do you really think I need this system? DO you think that's what we're doing here?

The law shows us not just our need for forgiveness but also our need to be made holy. It shows us our utter lack of ability to become holy, eve with the law. It shows our need for a savior.

There was a famous rabbi – Yohanen Ben Zakkai who lived around the time of Jesus. He was a primary contributor to the Mishnah, a core text for Jews. The Babylonian Talmud records a conversation he has with his disciples. He's close to death and they find him weeping and ask him why he's weeping. This is his response.

If I were being taken today before a human king who is here today and tomorrow in the grave, whose anger if he is angry with me does not last forever, who if he imprisons me does not imprison me forever and who if he puts me to death does not put me to everlasting death, and whom I can persuade with words and bribe with money, even so I would weep. Now that I am being taken before the supreme King of Kings, the Holy One, blessed be He, who lives and endures for ever and ever, whose anger, if He is angry with me, is an everlasting anger, who if He imprisons me imprisons me forever, who if He puts me to death puts me to death for ever, and whom I cannot persuade with words or bribe with money – Even more, when there are two ways before me, one leading to Paradise and the other to Gehenna, and I do not know by which I shall be taken, shall I not weep?

What's the problem? Here's a Rabbi who fears God more than most of us and knows the Torah better than most of us and he's completely unsure of his standing before God. Why? Because the law and the whole temple sacrificial system reminds him of his sin and his need for holiness year after year but it's

not powerful enough to offer any real assurance of his salvation or any real guarantee of his standing with God.

So the author of Hebrews says (This passage is on two slides)

The old system under the law of Moses was only a shadow, a dim preview of the good things to come, not the good things themselves. The sacrifices under that system were repeated again and again, year after year, but they were never able to provide perfect cleansing for those who came to worship. ²If they could have provided perfect cleansing, the sacrifices would have stopped, for the worshipers would have been purified once for all time, and their feelings of guilt would have disappeared.

³But instead, those sacrifices actually reminded them of their sins year after year. ⁴For it is not possible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins

And a little further down he says

¹⁰For God's will was for us to be made holy by the sacrifice of the body of Jesus Christ, once for all time.