

The Torah

Pastor Peter Berauer

July-August 2020

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Introduction

Reading: Genesis 5-9

Like many Christians today, I once had grown disinterested with much of the Old Testament. Why bother, I thought. Its names were confusing, places unfamiliar, stories filled with terror, and genealogies never seemed to end. So, out with the old, in with the new. Just give me Jesus. I distinctly remember one morning, walking into church with my parents, where I actually asked, “What’s the point in reading the Old Testament?”

I had not yet come to see that you can’t know where you’re going until you know where you’ve come from. I had not yet learned that the God of the Old Testament is the same God of the New. I had not yet come to see the beauty in the poetry, songs, and stories.

To be honest, I don’t know what changed in me. Maybe it was the realization that it might not be wise to shut my ears to well over half the bible. Maybe it was some of those old stories slowly doing their work on my heart. I definitely had a few teachers who mined their depths and helped open my eyes and ears to what God was saying. But, there was also the very word of Jesus. “You search the Scripture, because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness about me” (John 5:39). I couldn’t get around the truth that the Scriptures (which for Jesus was the Old Testament) were all about Him. So, if I wanted to experience more Jesus, I needed to experience more of the Old Testament.

And the Old Testament begins with the Torah. The Torah is the foundational word of a much larger conversation that is meant to open our eyes to a whole new world, challenge our conceptions of how things “really are,” and show us someone in whom we can trust and firmly believe in. The Torah is God’s first word to us, and for that alone it should not be taken for granted. But, it is also so much more than just that. The Torah shows us the very heart of God, pulls back the curtain on who we truly are as humans, and shows us the way forward in faith.

Opening Questions

- What are some common assumptions our culture makes about the nature of human beings?
- What are some common assumptions people make about the nature of God?
- What do people today long for more than most anything else?
- What kinds of things guide people through life as they navigate through tough decisions?

What the Torah is

The Torah is the first five books of the Bible: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. It is the first third of the tri-part Hebrew Scriptures which are referred to as the Tanak. The Tanak is comprised of the Torah, Nevi'im (or "Prophets"), and Ketuvim (or "Writings") which form the acronym TaNaK. The Hebrew word "Torah" is often translated into English as "Law," but a better understanding would be "instruction" or "teaching" as it is much more than just a list of rules or commands. Other names for the first five books of the bible are the Pentateuch ("Five Books") or the Book of Moses.

The reason why the Torah is also called the Book of Moses is that Moses is often referred to within the Bible as the author of the Torah (see Joshua 1:8 and John 5:46). However, the Torah itself tells us that Moses could not have written all of it. For example, Moses could not have written the ending which describes his death (Deuteronomy 34:1-12). Similarly, Moses could not have written portions that describe kings that lived long after he left the earth, or places that had not yet come into existence (Genesis 47:11 and Exodus 12:37). While Moses certainly wrote parts of the Torah – maybe even most of it – we should consider that the "Book of Moses" is a reference not exclusively to his authorship, but because much of the story revolves around him.

The Torah primarily falls under the category of biblical narrative. While it includes lists of commands, genealogies, poetry, and songs, it is first and foremost a story. It is God's story – the story of who He is and what He is doing in this world among His people. But, it is also our story. The Torah tells the story of God's people from their very beginnings. It pulls back the curtain on who we are, what we're like, and also how we are called to live under our loving Lord.

The purpose

The purpose of the Torah is two-fold. First, the Torah was written to teach us to live by faith in God. As John Sailhammer writes in, "The Pentateuch as Narrative, "

"The narrative strategy of the Pentateuch contrasts Abraham, who kept the Law, and Moses, whose faith was weakened under the law. This strategy suggests a conscious effort on the part of the author to distinguish between a life of faith before the Law (ante legem) and a lack of faith under the law (sub lege)." (p. 77)

Sailhammer's point is well taken. Taken as a whole, the Torah focuses most of its attention on two main characters: Abraham and Moses. Abraham, who was not given the Law (as Moses was), is commended by the Apostle Paul as a man of faith who was found to be righteous (Romans 4:16). Moses on the other hand, had the Law in hand, and yet because of his lack of faith he was not able to enter the Promised Land (See Numbers 20:12, "And the LORD said to Moses and Aaron, "Because you did not

believe in me, to uphold me as holy in the eyes of the people of Israel, therefore you shall not bring this assembly into the land that I have given them.). While the Torah is well known for its long lists of rules and commands, the “point” or purpose of the book is not to provide a manual on godly living to people of all time. The “point” or purpose is not to read the laws and simply apply them to our modern lives. That the Torah isn’t just a “rulebook” is evident in that the first Law isn’t given until 60 chapters into the book! Instead, the laws were recorded to show God’s holiness and humankind’s sinfulness. The way to righteousness (as Paul in Romans 4:16 reminds us) is not through obedience to the Law, but through faith.

But, faith in who? In Yahweh, of course. However, the Torah is also leading us towards someone else. A savior. A king. Someone who could and would fulfill the Law and remain faithful to the end. The Torah creates a longing in God’s people for a rescuer – someone who was and would do what Israel was not and could not. This longing stretches all the way back to Genesis 3:15 in God’s promise in the Garden to the serpent of an “offspring” that will crush his head, and Genesis 12:7 in God’s promise to Abraham of an “offspring” who will inherit the land. This longing finds its culmination in Deuteronomy 18:15 and 34:10-12. In the first passage, Moses prophesies that God will raise up a prophet like himself that the people will *actually* listen to. In the second passage we are told that such a prophet has not yet arisen. We’re still waiting. The Torah is creating a longing in us for someone who will lead His people into the Promised Land, and that longing will only be fulfilled in Christ.

The Torah reveals who God is

From the very first pages, the Torah reveals to us the very heart of God. He shows Himself over and over again to be a God of both power and love. His power is seen in His creation of the world, His sending of the flood, His destruction of Babel and scattering of its people, His sending of the plagues and parting of the Red Sea, and in His defeat over Israel’s enemies. God’s love is seen in His grace to sinners like Adam and Eve, His renewal after the flood and His call to “Be fruitful and multiply,” His promise to Abraham, His patience with Moses, and His repeated mercy upon Israel.

The Torah reveals who we are

The picture of humankind in the Torah is consistent...and not good. Humans are consistently portrayed as sinners in need of a savior. Readers of the Torah have barely turned over page one when Adam and Eve have rejected life in God’s good garden in favor of going their own way. The page has barely turned once again when the first offspring of Adam and Eve results in murder. The story of Lamech in Genesis 4:23-24 reminds us of how quickly things spiral out of control and of just how evil we can be, “Adah and Zillah, hear my voice; you wives of Lamech, listen to what I say: I have killed a man for wounding me, a young man for striking me. If Cain’s revenge is

sevenfold, then Lamech's is seventy-sevenfold." The stories continue to compound: There's the self-righteousness of Babel, the wickedness of the world in the days of Noah, the evil of Sodom and Gomorrah, and the destructive pride of Egypt and Pharaoh. Even when God's people are given every good gift, as in the case of wandering Israel, they complain and grumble. Lest we ever fool ourselves into thinking that we can, by our own ability or strength, live up to the righteousness of God, the Torah reminds us of who we truly are. We are sinners in need of a Savior who are called to live a life of faith.

The Torah points us to Jesus

We have already seen how the Torah has created a longing in us for a Savior that only Jesus can fulfill. However, over and over again the pages give us glimpses of that savior. Little foreshadows of Christ are everywhere. Jesus will be the rescuer who finally defeats Satan. Jesus will be the one to unify the people not a tower in the Middle East. The death and resurrection of Jesus cleanse us from all unrighteousness like a cleansing flood. Jesus will be the fulfillment of every promise. He will keep the Law where Israel has failed. He will trust in His Father where all others have turned away. Like Joseph, Jesus will be hated by His brothers, loved by His Father, and bring about the salvation of many people. Through Jesus we cross over from a life of slavery to sin, to an eternal land of freedom and peace. By faith in Jesus our sins are "Passed Over" and we are saved. Jesus is our great High Priest and our Sacrificial Lamb who comes to live in us His new Temple.

The example of Noah

A distinct narrative pattern emerges throughout the Torah. It starts with God's creation. Then, humans sin. Next, suffering ensues. Finally, God restores. Wash, rinse, repeat.

This narrative pattern is seen in the story of Noah. Genesis 5 begins with a brief recounting of the creation story and the making of humankind. The chapter ends with the genealogy culminating in evil, murderous Lamech. The next chapter opens with God seeing that "the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intention of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually" (v. 5). In response, God sends the flood as an act of judgment against human sin. Almost the entire human race suffers as a consequence. However, through Noah, God restores and rescues humanity and then sends them out with the same command He gave to Adam and Eve: Be fruitful and multiply.

Closing Questions

- What are you looking forward to the most as we read through the Torah?
- What questions do you have about the Torah or the Old Testament?

Creation and Re-Creation

Reading: Genesis 1:1-4:2

God's Place. God's People. God's Presence. God's Partners.

This is the creation story. This is what God longed for in the Garden of Eden.

The opening pages of Genesis tell the story of the Garden of Eden which was created to be the place where God's presence dwelt fully among his people who would live together with Him as full partners in the ongoing work of creation.

*In this Garden, God's people would work (and there was plenty of that to do!) but they would also rest. That's because God *wanted* to work with and through them, not because He *needed* to use them. In this divine partnership God lovingly calls His people into His work, but also invites them to simply "be" with Him. In fact, there was a whole day set aside for nothing but resting and being (an oddity to be sure in most cultures across the world and throughout history). It is both humbling and encouraging to know that our relationship with God is not utilitarian. He didn't just have a bunch of children to work the farm. He doesn't need us. He wants to be with us.*

It's a "delightful" picture of a life of faith. In fact, that's what the word "Eden" means: "Delight". When God made the world and everything in it, it delighted Him. Nothing delights Him more than for His presence to be with His people living together as His partners.

The Garden of Eden truly was the converging of Heaven and Earth. There was no great divide between the home of God and the home of humans. Both overlapped. And while the two were torn apart by sin, God longed to bring them back together. And that they did. In the tabernacle – and eventually in the Temple, Heaven and Earth would meet again. But, buildings break and fall. And so, God in His love would find another way to bring Heaven and earth together. It wouldn't be in a building, but in a person. But, more on that to come.

Opening Questions

- What are some common explanations for where our world came from?
- Why do you think God created the world and everything in it?
- Where do you see God continuing His work of creation today?
- What do you think it means to be made in our creators image?

Creation Reveals Who God Is

Already, on the opening pages of the story, we begin to see the heart of God. Everything God does and says shows us a little more about who He is. And what we are starting to see is God's power, His love, and His order.

The opening four words (two in Hebrew) tell us so much about who is in charge of this world: In the beginning, God. When no one else was around to suggest, protest, or even speak up, God created everything we see with our eyes (and He made those too). Before there were kings, queens, or presidents calling the shots, God was. Before diseases and pandemics took control of our lives, God was already holding us all together. Before natural disasters seemed to rip our lives out of our grips, God was firmly in control. God was the one who laid the foundation, who simply spoke and everything was. Ours is a God of POWER.

He is also a God of love. No one told God He had to make our world (because there was no one else yet). He didn't create out of a sense of obligation or guilt. No, simply love. And love needs an object. And that is us.

Finally, we see that God's power and love are not chaotic or confusing. That's because He is a God of order. Each day had its work. The first three days involved setting the boundaries, the next three with filling them in. There was even a day set aside to "sabbath" or rest.

Creation Reveals Who We Are

These opening pages also begin to tell us about ourselves. Because Adam and Eve are not fairytale figures disconnected from reality. They are our first parents. In the mirror of their lives we begin to see ourselves.

In their creation, we see that we too are the creatures rather than the creator. We would like to think that we are the ones calling the shots and making the rules. But, we're not. We came from dust, and to dust we shall return. And that can be humbling, but as we'll see it is also beautiful. To be the creation rather than the creator means we have one who is watching over us, holding us, and loving us with an everlasting love.

While the creation story humbles us, it also empowers us. Because we were not created to live as mindless robots, sent to do our masters bidding. We are co-creators. Deputies. We have been given the breath of life that fills us and sends us out to continue our creator's work. Listen to how God puts it,

“Then God said, ‘Let us make humans in our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth. So God created man in his own image, in the image of God

he created him; male and female he created them. And God blessed them. And God said to them, ‘Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth.’” (Genesis 1:26-28)

We were made in God’s image: that is, we were made to create as we have been created. What’s interesting is that the word for “image” is also the word for “icon” or “idol” – each things that God’s people were forbidden in the first commandment from making for themselves. You see, God knew they didn’t have to create idols or images. First of all, they had Him. But, they also had each other. They were the icons/images/idols of God. What an empowering message!

It should be noted that the primary tasks of subduing the earth and filling it is something that just one of us could never do alone. We were meant to live in community. We need partners and helpers. That’s why God gave Adam, Eve. So that *together* they might fulfill God’s call and reflect the image of God they bore. And, in Genesis 4:1-2 we see that beginning to happen as they, together, give birth to Cain and Abel.

Finally, we learn a sobering reality about our condition: we are sinners. It’s who we are, and the reason why we sin. Adam and Eve show us that we are all curved inward upon ourselves. Rather than living a life turned outward in faith toward God and loving service towards one another, we serve ourselves and our own interests. This is why God had to send His Savior – because we couldn’t save ourselves. But, again, more on that later.

Creation As Divine Cosmic Temple

The creation story is the story of God building His temple. That might sound strange to you, because the opening chapters seem to be about a Garden rather than a building, but it’s true. As we will see, the tabernacle and the temple were the places where God’s presence dwelt among God’s people so that they could continue to live with Him as partners. Isn’t that what we find in the Garden? What we will later find in the tabernacle and temple is what God wanted for the whole world from the very beginning. These places were mere reflections of His original world-wide design.

So then, when God finishes His work in the Garden and takes a “sabbath” rest, it’s not because He’s tired. God can’t get “worn out”. The sabbath day wasn’t about sitting on the couch to “recharge” His batteries. The sabbath was an inauguration day. It was a new beginning. The beginning of an eternity spent living with and working through His people. It was the day He took His place

In fact, when you compare the Garden and the tabernacle/temple you’ll be amazed by the similarities. Check them out below:

The same word used for God “walking” in the Garden is also used for God “walking” in the tabernacle. See Genesis 3:8 // Leviticus 26:12 and Deuteronomy 23:14

The same words used to describe what Adam was to do in the Garden (“works and keeps”) is also used of the priests in the tabernacle. See Genesis 2:15 // Numbers 3:7-8; 8:25-26

The Tree of Life is reflected in the lampstand of the Temple. See Genesis 2:9 //Exodus 25:18-22

The Cherubim that guard the Garden (God’s dwelling place) after the fall also guard the Ark of the Covenant (God’s dwelling place). See Genesis 3:24 // Exodus 25:19-22

Both the Garden and the tabernacle include lots of trees and wood. See Genesis 2:9 // 1 Kings 6:18, 29, 32, 35

Both the entrance to the Garden and the entrance to the tabernacle/temple face east. See Genesis 3:24 // Ezekiel 40:6

Both the Garden and Temple/Tabernacle have rivers flowing from them. See Genesis 2:10 // Ezekiel 47:1-12; Revelation 21:1-2; 22:1-2

Sabbath rest is the culmination of both. See Genes 2:1-3 // Exodus 31:12-17

When viewed side-by-side, we begin to see that the eventual building of the tabernacle and temple was God’s way of getting back to the garden. Just as He created the world to have a place where His presence could dwell among His people so that they could live as partners, so God commands the building of the tabernacle/temple to recapture what was lost.

Creation As A Theme

God’s work of creation was not a “one and done”. As we’ve already seen, the work was meant to continue through His people Adam and Eve. But, because of sin, we are also in constant need of re-creation.

One of the first stories to highlight God’s continuing work of creation and re-creation is the story of Noah. After the destruction of the flood, God begins to create again. The dove Noah sends out over the water reminds us of the Spirit of God that hovers over the water in Genesis 1. After the flood, God once again commands His people to “be fruitful and multiply.”

God will also create through Abraham, who will create a whole new family (the Israelites). As God rescues this new family from Egypt and brings them into the promised land, it is almost as though He is ushering them into a new Eden. Like the garden, this will be a place of abundance flowing with milk and honey (Exodus 33:3). The people are told, as Adam was, to “subdue” the land. The Promised Land is also

described as a land of darkness just like the world was described in the beginning before creation.

God is constantly creating and re-creating. As sin brings death, God brings life. Out of our nothingness, God brings about something beautiful. Through God's Son we finally find a re-creation that lasts.

Closing Questions

- What does the creation story point us to Jesus?
- How does the creation story lead us deeper into a life of faith?
- Why do you think God values the Sabbath day so much?
- What lessons from the creation story can we carry with us into our every day lives?

Covenants and Promises

Reading: Genesis 12-15

The story of the Torah begins with unity: God living and partnering with His people as one. Very quickly, as we saw last time, that unity is torn apart. The beautiful oneness between God and humanity is lost after they eat the fruit. Fear and shame appear oneness and concord once were. As a result, Adam and Eve will not walk and talk with God in the Garden, but are cast and kept out.

The rest of the story of the Bible is a story of reunification: God wanting to return to the oneness He once had with His people. He does not want us to live in a relationship defined by fear and shame. He doesn't want us running and hiding from Him. He wants to partner with us, work through us, and welcome us into His rest.

God's covenants are His path back to unity and oneness. The biblical covenants were God's way of bringing us back to where we belong: with Him. They were a way to restore what was lost in the Garden.

A covenant, simply defined, is a partnership founded upon a promise made out of love. If that sounds like a marriage to you – you're right! In fact, the word often translated covenant is sometimes also translated as a marriage (Malachi 2:14). By making covenants with His people, He is uniting Himself to them like a groom to a bride.

In a way, the story of the Bible begins with a covenant. And it's not just the marriage covenant between Adam and Eve. It's a covenant that God enters into when He makes the first humans, invites them into a partnership ("Be fruitful and multiply...have dominion!"), and lives among them in love. Although the word "covenant" is never used in that story, the covenant is there.

As the story continues, God will make five more major covenants with His people. Each one will be received with joy and an initial period of faithful obedience. In the end, each one will be rejected in favor of sin. The final covenant, however, will be everlasting. It will be totally one-sided. But, through God's final covenant, His people will be welcomed back in, brought near to Him in love, and sent out to share that love with the world.

Opening Questions

- What are some common partnerships people enter into today? Have you entered into any recently?
- What forms the basis of our partnerships today? What holds both sides accountable?
- What does it tell us about God that He wants to form partnerships with and make promises to His people?

God's First Four Covenants

- I. Noah (Genesis 8:20-9:17)
 - a. Promise: God promises to never send another destroying flood. He promises to continue to send the seasons and days as He provides through the rains and harvests to care for His people.
 - b. Response: Noah is to continue the work of Adam and Eve: Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth.”
 - c. Sign: Rainbow
- II. Abraham (Genesis 12, 15, and 17)
 - a. Promise: God promises to bless Abraham and Sarah in their old age with children. In fact, their family will be as numerous as the stars in the sky. Abraham's offspring will inherit the Promised Land, and through His offspring all the nations of the world will be blessed.
 - b. Response: Abram will leave the land of his father's and follow God to the land He leads Him to.
 - c. Sign: Circumcision
- III. Moses/Israel (Exodus 19-24)
 - a. Promise: God promised to make Israel His treasured possession and they will live as a kingdom of priests and as a holy nation.
 - b. Response: The people will obey God's voice and keep God's covenant.
 - c. Sign: The Sabbath Day (Exodus 31:13-17)
- IV. David (2 Samuel 7)
 - a. Promise: God will make David's name great, will appoint a place for Israel, and will give them rest. God will raise up offspring after David to whom God will establish His Kingdom. One of David's descendants will

build God a house, God will establish his throne forever, and God will never take His love away from him.

- b. Response: David and his descendants need to live in faithfulness and obey God's commands.
- c. Sign: None (Everlasting Throne?)

The Abrahamic Covenant

Genesis 15 describes both a beautiful promise, and a seemingly bizarre ceremony. God makes His covenant and then commands Abram to "Bring me a heifer". This is not standard operating procedure for our agreements today. Before we know it cows, rams, goats, turtledoves, and pigeons are being cut in two. But, in Abram's day, this was actually kind of normal. When two people made a covenant in the ancient world there was rite and ritual surrounding it. One of them is what we see here. The sacrificed and halved animals are a way of saying, "If one of us breaks our covenant, what happened to these animals will happen to that person." After the animals were cut, the two wo people walk down aisle together - kind of like marriage

But, this ceremony takes a twist when the rite is interrupted by a dream. It seems like Abram has fallen asleep. We quickly find out this is no ordinary dream: God is speaking. God makes it clear that the people that will be formed from Abram will face trouble. More trouble than they can handle. Rest assured, God lets it be known, this will not be the end of the covenant.

When Abram awakes, God continues the ceremony. Except that it's not Abram and God walking down the aisle, it's just a flaming torch and smoking fire pot. These are symbols of God. Later on God will lead people through desert with smoke by day and fire by night. We are learning (even if it's not obvious at first) that this is a one-way unconditional covenant. God knows that Abrams descendants will really mess things up, but He walks down the aisle alone anyway. God is going to shoulder the consequences of covenant failure. Human failure doesn't deter God.

The Abrahamic covenant shows us that God is the initiator, sustainer, and finisher of all the partnerships and promises He is forming and making. The eventual success of the partnership does not rest on the people, but upon His shoulders. Where they will fail, God will remain steadfast.

The New Covenant

As Jesus ate the Passover with His disciples He boldly declared that He was not just repeating an old tradition; He was making a new covenant. One that would result

from the breaking of His body and the pouring out of His blood. Just like the heifer's that were broken and bloodied, Jesus' body would be broken and bloodied for His people. Once again, God knew that His people could not carry the consequences of their behavior, and so Jesus shouldered it all upon the cross. In Jesus, we see that human failure cannot deter God from keeping His promises.

In Jesus, God's family is fruitful and multiplied. In Jesus, the promised offspring has brought God's blessing and acceptance to all nations. In Jesus, we are made into a holy nation and a kingdom of priests. In Jesus, our King is reigning and ruling, and Him God dwells fully and eternally. The proper response to this new covenant is the same as always: trust and obey. In light of what God has done for us in Jesus, God's people cling to this new covenant in faith, and obediently follow our Lord's leading. We forever hold up before our eyes the sign of the new covenant: the cross on which our savior died.

Closing Questions

- What do God's covenants teach us about the nature and depth of our sin?
- How should we respond today to Christ's covenantal love?
- How do God's covenants embolden and equip us to love, and invite us to rest?

Law and Faith

Reading: Exodus 19-24

We've come to the part of the story where many of us begin to lose interest or become confused. Suddenly, the exciting stories of Noah, Abraham, and the people dramatically escaping from Egypt come to a halt. The plot slows to a standstill as law after law is given. Just how many laws there are is a question that the rabbis have long debated. Some have said there are 613, others 611. Either way, it's a lot!

But, it's not just the amount of laws that causes us to lose interest or leave us confused. Many of the laws seem so outdated, with little to no application to modern day life. Take one of the laws that is repeated three times: Don't boil a young goat in its mother's milk (Exodus 23:19; 34:26, and Deuteronomy 14:21). I don't know about you, but that's not something that is on the top of my mind each day. "What's the point?" we're left asking.

Sometimes, the laws we read confuse us. Because while some topics are treated and addressed at length, others have some gaps that we would expect to be filled in. For example, in the divorce laws of Deuteronomy 24 we are told that a man can divorce his wife for "indecenty". Well, what qualifies as "indecent"? No indication is giving. We're left wondering why God would omit such a seemingly important detail. And then, there's the fact that many of the laws that repeat themselves are repeated differently. Take the Passover instructions for example (Exodus 12:7-9 and Deuteronomy 16:7). In some places the Israelites are told to cook the lamb by roasting it and NOT boiling it, but in other places they are explicitly told to cook it by boiling it. Well, which one is it?

And so, in our boredom and confusion, most of us have given up trying to understand all these laws. We have stopped asking, "What's the point?" because there does not seem to be one. When we read through the Bible we simply skip over and skim these passages.

The abundance of laws has also given many people the impression that our Bibles have two gods: The Old Testament God who ruled by Law, and the New Testament God who rules with Grace. As we will see, this could not be further from the truth. The God of the Old and New Testaments is the same God: He is a God of justice AND forgiveness who always leads His people forward by faith.

There is one passage we will close this introduction with, which encapsulates so much of the character of our God. It is Exodus 34:6-7. "6 The Lord passed before him and proclaimed, "The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, 7 keeping steadfast love for thousands,^[a] forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children and the children's children, to the third and the fourth generation."

Opening Questions

- What questions do you have about the Law?
- Do laws have a positive or negative connotation? Why?
- What does it tell us about God that He gave His people 613 (611?) laws?

Who is the Law for?

Have you ever wondered if you need to keep the Old Testament Laws – and if so, which ones? After all, keeping the Ten Commandments makes sense. But, stoning adulterers seems a little harsh. So, why do we hold onto some so dearly and others we've let go?

As we read through the Mosaic Law, we need to remember something important: these sections are a part of a much bigger story. They were not written as a stand-alone legal document that was meant to be transferred down through history and applied to all peoples. No – these sections are a part of a story, which is why there are gaps and repetitions. There are gaps because these sections were never meant to present a comprehensive law code. There are repetitions because God is clearly trying to get our attention or cause us to reflect on something important.

An important part of God's story in the lives of the ancient Israelite's was when He gave to them rules and commands. Let us remember that these laws were not given *to* us – they were given *to* ancient Israel. But, let us also remember that – if read within the bigger story – they do have something to say *for* us.

Put a little differently, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy tell us the story of God's people before, during and after their dramatic rescue from Egypt. An important part of that story is when God gave them His commands. Moses and the Israelites were obliged to follow the laws God gave – just like Noah was obliged to build the ark according to the directions God gave. But, just like we are not called to build arks today, we're also not meant to follow all the Sinai commands.

The laws were written to Israel, not 21st century Americans. They are part of a larger story, and were not meant to be read as a timeless legal code. However, this does not mean that they do not have anything to say for us today. As we will see, they reveal the heart of God, show us what it can look like to live as God's people, and are leading us towards Jesus. They teach us what a wise and godly life can look like – at least in one cultural context. Read in the light of the broader story, we can begin to gain and learn much from all these laws.

Why did God give Israel the Law?

We have just established that God did not give the Mosaic Law to us. So, why did He give it to Israel? The simplest answer is this: to show them how to live. As we've already seen, God's people just don't get it. They lie, cheat, and steal any chance they get. They don't know how to treat each other right. Left to their own devices, they are capable of immense hurt and harm. And so, the laws show them how to live in harmony with each other. They also set boundaries that will keep them in line and stop them from causing even more hurt.

The unfolding progression of the story shows us that the Law is given in response to human sin and hard heartedness. For example, in Exodus 19:5 God establishes His covenant with Israel and tells the people simply to obey Him and keep the covenant. The people agree and promise to do everything God commands. Very quickly, we realize life will not be that simple. There are several key stories that show us that Israel doesn't "get it". The first is the Golden Calf incident (Exodus 32). Following this abomination at the hands of the first priest, Aaron, God gives a lengthy list of laws specifically for the priest. This seems to be because Aaron has shown us that God needs to explain the role of the priests and to give them boundaries. Another important, albeit short, story is that of the Goat Idols (Lev. 17:1-9). This sin seems to be brought about by the people rather than the priests. In response to this sin, God gives lengthy "holiness" codes on how the people are supposed to live. The laws are showing people and priest how to live with each other and before God, while also giving them boundaries that keep them in line.

The laws do more than just that though. These laws, in many cases, are setting them apart. They make it clear that they are different from all the other nations and tribes around them. The Israelites are God's people, a chosen people, and a holy nation, and these rules will make that clear. Such is the case in the example from above about not boiling a baby goat in its mother's milk. While that seems like a strangely particular command, history tells us that it was actually a practice of some of their neighbors that showed their ruthless brutality. God's people were not supposed to be like the rest of the world. These laws helped set them apart and remind them of who they are.

Other laws had to do with cleanliness and purity. While going about everyday life, people do things that make them unclean before God (activities like touching dead bodies or have sex). These are not bad or sinful things, just activities that require purification before approaching the holy, perfect creator. Leviticus, for example, outlines many rules that will get the people clean and give them access to God after their impurity.

The rules and commands are for the good of the people: teaching them, keeping them in line, setting them apart, and providing access after impurity to their holy God. The commands also show the people of Israel who God is. That is, within the laws,

God's heart and character are revealed. "Be holy, because I the Lord your God, am holy" (Leviticus 19:2). The expectation of holy living is intimately tied to the holiness of God. In their keeping of the law, the people would be reflecting the heart and character of God.

As the Israelites heard and reflected upon the laws they learned about who God is. For example, the sacrificial system commands showed them that God is totally holy and perfect, but that He has graciously provided a way for sinners to approach Him: God is a god of grace and love. The civic laws for everyday living showed them that God values justice and equity and peace. The criminal laws showed them that their God is righteous and not cruel. When they reflected on the underlying principles behind the rules and commands, they could begin to gain a greater understanding of the values, qualities, and characteristics of God (and so can we!...more about that soon enough).

Why does God have us read the Mosaic Law today?

Perhaps we are able to understand why God gave the laws to Moses and the people of Israel: They taught Israel how to live within their cultural context, kept them in line due to the temptations of their day, and showed them who God was and what He was like. But, why do we continue to read these strange rules all these years later? What can we, as 21st Century American Christians gain from them? I don't know about you, but outside of the bible I have never read and studied ancient law codes from cultures that have long since passed away and that seem to have such little relevance to my daily life.

Read within the broader story, the Mosaic Law reminds us that there is only one way to live: by faith. The giving of the law within the story ultimately highlights God's holiness and human's sinfulness. Over and over the people are not able to keep the command. At almost every chance they get, they fail and falter. The brief shining moments of obedience are always followed by a litany of disobedient acts.

But, while the giving of the law within the story only highlights human sinfulness, God's grace and mercy also begin to come to the forefront. Despite the Israelites repeated transgressions, God continues to welcome them back and pour out His love. While they don't deserve it, God persistently draws them back through grace. , *"The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, ⁷keeping steadfast love for thousands,^[a] forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin" Exodus 34:6-7a).*

If there is any hope for a future, it cannot come through obedience to the laws, but only through faith. Our only hope as sinners is to trust in the grace and forgiveness of our loving God. We continue to read these strange and obscure laws from an ancient civilization all these years later so that we would see that God most certainly does

welcome us back no matter how far we've wandered. He wants us to trust in His grace and have faith in His promises.

So, we read this ancient law code so that we might reflect on our sin and God's grace, and so that we would learn to trust in His kindness. But, we also continue to gain wisdom from the commands. While we don't simply "copy and paste" them into our context today—for example we don't stone adulterers or punish people with tattoos—we do reflect on what they teach us about God, His values, and how He wants us to live today. There is much we can learn about the character and heart of God that we can take with us into our 21st Century American lives.

The laws are leading us to Jesus.

Ultimately, we read the Old Testament laws because they are leading us to Jesus. They were never meant to be the end-all-be-all. They were meant to show us our need for something greater than ourselves. Several of the prophets understood this well. The prophet Jeremiah wrote,

“³¹ Behold, the days are coming, declares the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah, ³² not like the covenant that I made with their fathers on the day when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, my covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, declares the Lord. ³³ For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts. And I will be their God, and they shall be my people. ³⁴ And no longer shall each one teach his neighbor and each his brother, saying, ‘Know the Lord,’ for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, declares the Lord. For I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more.”

Ezekiel also understood this well. He echoes many of Jeremiah's sentiments,

“²⁶ And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh.²⁷ And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules.^[a]”

The Law was not able to bring about obedience leading to God's acceptance. Rather, it highlighted human sin and disobedience. God always understood that we needed another way. The Jesus way.

In Jesus we see the Law fulfilled in more ways than one. First, Jesus kept the entire Law. Everything about how Jesus is represented in the Gospels tells us this: from His presentation at the Temple by His parents, to His obedience in the desert amidst Satan's temptations. Jesus was strong where we are weak. He stood firm where we have stumbled. He was perfect where we have sinned.

But, Jesus also fulfilled the Law by embodying it in all He did. Remember, the Law was given in part to show us who God is: Righteous, loving, orderly, peaceful, and just. He cares for the poor and needy and lifts up the humble. He is not cruel, hateful, or spiteful. Jesus embodies all those qualities and characterizes in thought, word, and deed. In Jesus we see our Holy God with flesh on. In Him we find our own righteousness, Sabbath rest, and access to God.

Closing Questions

- How do God's rules and commands highlight God's grace?
- Can you think of any Old Testament rules or commands that help point us to Jesus or give us a glimpse of who He is?
- What does it mean to live a holy life?

The Tabernacle and God's Presence

Reading: Exodus 25-30

When we hear the word “Temple” we probably think of a place of worship. It’s a building where people go to offer thanks and praise to God. But, temples in the ancient world were so much more than just a place for people to gather in reverence to their god. Temples were the places where the gods lived. Temples were the homes of the deities. They were the “control rooms” or “headquarters” of the gods on earth.

As we’ve already seen, the Garden of Eden was created to be just such a temple. The Garden was where God wanted to live with His people. It’s where He would continue His work of creation as He worked through His people Adam and Eve. While most earthly temples in the ancient world included statues or idols (images) of the god who supposedly lived there, in the Temple of the Garden, Adam and Eve were the “images” of God. The temple of the Garden was where the presence of God dwelled with the people of God who were the partners of God.

Of course, sin ruined all that. After Adam and Eve ate the fruit they were cast out of God’s presence. Suddenly, they were on the outside looking in. Heaven and Earth, which had overlapped in the Garden, were now torn apart.

We know by now that God was not content to sit idly by, disconnected from the people He loved so much. He consistently works on drawing them back in. The tabernacle was one such move back to His people. The tabernacle (or simply, “Tent”) described in Exodus 25-30 is God’s way of getting back to the “Garden” life that was lost. Through the Tabernacle, God would not only once again be living and dwelling with His people, He would continually be restoring their access to Him and meeting them with mercy and love. Wherever the people went, God was going with them.

Opening Questions

- Where do people go to meet God today?
- If you asked 100 people where God lives, what kinds of answers would you hear?
- When you think of Heaven, what do you think of and where do you think it is?

What the Tabernacle Meant To Israel

Everything about the Tabernacle screamed “Garden of Eden.” From the materials used—Acacia wood, gold, and precious stones—which were all found in the Garden,

to the cherubim that guarded the Ark of the Covenant -just like the cherubim who guarded the entrance to Eden, even to the three tiered design of the Tabernacle (Courtyard, Holy Place, Holy of Holies) just like the three tiered design of creation (sky, land, and sea). Therefore, when the people of Israel looked at the Tabernacle they would have immediately thought of the Garden and God's gracious presence there with His people. God was very clearly speaking a message of restoration and mercy; that even though person after person had sinned against God, He was going to make things right. Every time a farmer was out in the fields or a family was cooking dinner, all they had to do was look up to the smoke that rose from the Tabernacle or get a whiff of the animals being slaughtered, and they would know that God was with them. That which was lost in the Garden was once again theirs.

The Tabernacle didn't just remind the Israelites of God's presence. It also spoke to His utter holiness. God was completely "other"; that is totally different than His people. He was perfect, righteous, just, and kind. He was set apart, and the Tabernacle reflected that. Its orderliness, ornateness, and symbolism marked the Tabernacle as "different". The time and financial resources poured into it made it clear that this was holy ground.

The work of the Tabernacle also spoke to God's *merciful* presence among them. Not only was the Holy God in their midst, but He was there with mercy, grace, and love. That is what the sacrificial system revealed. By providing a very clear way of atoning for sins, God was repeatedly welcoming His people back to His love. The sacrificial system provided a restoration of access to God that sin had corrupted. By ordaining the priests, God was providing mediators who could stand before God on behalf of the people.

Everything about the Tabernacle revealed God's loving kindness towards His people. Sadly, the Tabernacle was taken for granted. God's mercy and grace were forfeited. The pattern we've seen already continued: God met His people with love, and they turned away in sin. Eventually, the Temple (which was the permanent Tabernacle built by Solomon) would be destroyed twice. But, once again, even that could not stop God from drawing near to His people.

Jesus as the Temple and High Priest

Throughout the New Testament Jesus is portrayed as both the Temple of God and its High Priest. That is, Jesus is the one in whom God dwells (John 1:14; Colossians 1:15-20). Jesus is the “greater” Temple, not built by human hands (Matthew 12:6). When we want to know where God is, we don’t look to a moveable tent or a glorious building made out of stone and wood. We look to Jesus and see our Creator in the flesh.

We also look to Jesus as the one who brings us access to God. The book of Hebrews reminds us that Jesus is the true High Priest, who through the once-for-all sacrifice of His life brings us access to God. He is the one who offered up His own body to make an atonement for our sin. It’s because of Jesus, and only because of Jesus, that we know we can approach God in boldness and confidence, rather than fear and trembling.

The Church as the Temple and Royal Priesthood

While Jesus is most certainly described as the dwelling place of God, interestingly, so are God’s people. 1 Peter 2: 5 puts it simply, “You yourselves like living stones are being built up as a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.” Together, as God’s family, God is living among us. Because of Jesus, what was lost in the Garden has been restored in our lives. Once again, we are living in the presence of God. Heaven and Earth overlap once again. Like the Old Testament priests, we approach God once more. But, no longer do we bring Him sacrifices of goats and rams and sheep. Instead, our sacrifice is spiritual.

The story of Pentecost put a visual and auditory stamp on the reality of God’s people as the Temple. On Pentecost, Jesus’ disciples had God descend on them in the form of tongues of fire. In 1 Kings 8, as King Solomon was bringing the Ark into the Temple, much the same thing happened! Pentecost, therefore, was the clear and visible sign that once again God was living AMONG His people, IN His people!

The Tabernacle Points Us Forward

While God’s work of restoring His presence among us took a giant leap forward in Jesus, there is even more to come. Revelation 21-22 shows us the even greater future that awaits us in Christ. There we see that heaven and earth will one day fully overlap in a garden-city unlike any other. There the work of Jesus begun in us will come to completion. In that place, once Christ returns, we will live with God, but there will be no Temple (Revelation 21:22) because God is the Temple and we have been restored to live and rule with Him as we were always meant to.

Closing Questions

- What does it mean for us and our life together that we (the Church) are God's dwelling place/tabernacle?
- What does it mean for us and our life together that we are a Holy Priesthood?
- How does our hope of a future lived with God change our lives here and now?

The Land and Rest

Reading: Numbers 33-35

In the Torah, land is a precious, undeserved gift from God from the opening page onward. “In the beginning, God created the Heavens and the Earth”. Not because He had to or because He was under some obligation to create, but simply as a gift of love. The abundant and beautiful land of the Garden of Eden was a gracious gift from a Father to His children.

And, while that land was lost to sin, God’s loving graciousness was not. He was determined to live with His people in a place of blessing and belonging. Which is exactly what He promises to Abraham. “To your offspring I will give this land.” (Genesis 12:7). Once again, as pure gift, God will provide a land to His people. Once again, He will bless them. Once again they will have a land of their own to call home – somewhere they belong.

As we read the story, we quickly become aware that this is important to God. The Promised Land is promised over and over again: Genesis 13:14-18, 17:7-9, 26:2-4, and 28:13-15 all re-establish the promise. Through this onslaught of promises, we also quickly become aware of who God is: a God of blessing and belonging. He is the giver of every last blessing. Every good thing flows from His hand, and He is ready to pour them out abundantly. It is in God and with God that find belonging. It is with Him that we find our forever home.

Sadly, the blessing and the belonging promised in the Promised Land would not last. The foreboding words of Moses in Deuteronomy 4:25-27 where he predicts that the people will one day be scattered from the land comes true. Sin once again drives the people out from God’s place of blessing and belonging. That won’t be the end of the story though. But, you already knew that. God will one day offer up eternal blessing and belonging NOT in a place, but in a person: Jesus.

Opening Questions

- Where is your “homeland”? Do you think of a city, region, or state? Do you think of the country your ancestors came from or the one you were born in?
- What roles does your homeland play in your identity and purpose?
- What are some of the blessings of living in the land we do?

Belonging

- Where do you find belonging? Where/with whom do you feel a sense of belonging? Where do other people try to find a sense of belonging?

The Promised Land was always a place where God's people were given a sense of belonging. It was where God was leading them after years of wandering around the desert with no place to call their own. Finally, after all that weary walking, God was settling them down and giving them a home. This place would be their own.

In this land, they would belong to God. He would be there God, and they would be His people. The Israelites would live under His banner of grace and truth and love. No other god could claim them. No other people would rule over them. They belonged to God.

And so, it was there home. It was where they "fit". "See, I have set the land before you. Go in, and take possession of the land that the LORD swore to your fathers, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, to give to them and to their offspring after them...do not fear or be dismayed". This was a place where they wouldn't have to be afraid or worried. It was where they belonged: God's people, in God's presence, living as God's partners.

Blessing

- What is a blessing? What kinds of things does the bible call blessings?

The land into which God was leading the people is always described as good, often as flowing with milk and honey (Exodus 3:8,17; 13:5; Leviticus 20:24; Numbers 13:17). It would be that way because God cared for it (Deuteronomy 11:11-12). Under His watchful eye and in His loving hands, the land would produce abundance and give goodness. Just as God provided for the Israelites in the desert with quail and manna feeding them apart from any work they did God would continue to provide in their new home. But now, their menu would be expanded!

It would also be a place of rest (Deuteronomy 12:9). That would be because it would be where God rested/lived/dwelt among His people. Wherever God was, His people could rest easy. He would protect them, watch over them, and provide for them as their King. In the Promised Land there would be no more wandering, no more warring, and no more worrying about tomorrow.

Behaving

- How do you think God expected His people to respond to the gift of the Land in their attitudes and actions?

This precious Promised Land was not without its expectations. Once God had ushered them in to this place they certainly didn't deserve, He wanted them to respond with grateful hearts and obedient hands.

“As for you, you shall keep my covenant” (Genesis 17:8-9)

“Do not make yourselves unclean by any of these things, for by all these nations I am driving out before you have become unclean, and the land became unclean so that I punished its iniquity, and the land vomited out its inhabitants. But you shall keep my statutes and my rules and do none of these abominations, either the native or the stranger who sojourns among you (for the people of the land, who were before you, did all of these abominations, so that the land became unclean), **lest the land vomit you out when you make it unclean, as it vomited out the nation that was before you.**” (Leviticus 18:25-28)

“You shall not defile the land in which you live, in the midst of which I dwell, for I the LORD dwell in the midst of your people.” (Numbers 35:34).

God's people are called to keep His covenant and obey His commands. This is because the land is His. God is the landowner and they are merely the tenants. God does not want them to forget that everything they have is a gracious gift, rather than something they deserve (Leviticus 25:23). That is why God commands that the first crops and animals of the land were to be given back to Him through their sacrifices (Leviticus 27:30-33; Deuteronomy 14:22; 26:9-15). These sacrifices were reminders that everything they had came from God.

Ultimately, what God is asking the people to respond with is *faith*. It is a lack of faith that causes their entrance into the land to run into trouble. After the Israelites persistent grumbling against God He says to Moses, “How long will this people despise me? And how long will they not believe in me, in spite of all the signs that I have done among them?” (Numbers 14:11). Faith that trusts in God's goodness and power responds with obedience. God wants His people to trust that He is just the King they need, but over and over they do not. It is their lack of faith, which results in sin, that will make life difficult for them. It is their sin which will lead to all of their problems and eventually send them out of the land and into exile.

But, even then God will not give up. He has too many blessings to give. He knows that they belong no where else but with Him.

Closing Questions

- How does the Promised Land point us forward to Jesus?
- According to God, where is our “homeland”? That is, where do we find belonging?
- How should that homeland shape our identity and purpose?