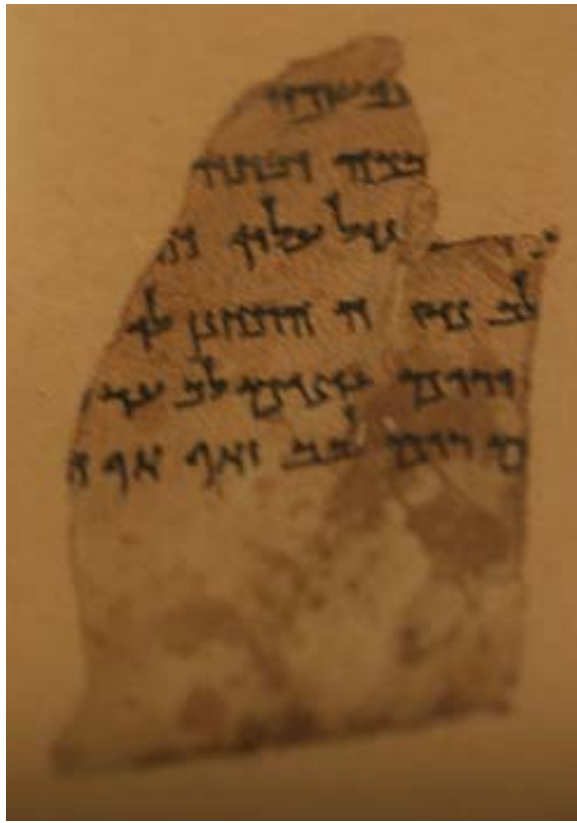


*The Covenant Pulpit*



# EXODUS

*Possessing the Promises*

“PRIORITIES”  
EXODUS 17

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The coal miner's son could never please his father. His mother loved her little Marty with the uncomplicated affection of a simple country peasant. But his brutish father often berated and beat Marty. No matter how hard he tried, the boy could never satisfy his demanding dad.

In his angst to earn his father's approval, this coal miner's son became a manic perfectionist. He also became a religious zealot. If he couldn't satisfy his earthly father, maybe he could please his heavenly Father. Tragically Marty's *God* became the mirror image of his angry dad.

To placate his coal miner father, he went off to college and then law school, where he drove himself to earn top honors. He was also scandalized by the rowdy behavior of his classmates. He constantly complained that his school was more like a whorehouse and beer parlor than a university. To placate his heavenly Father, he made a promise that he would never succumb to such carnal pursuits. He took a vow of chastity. When he was tormented by youthful lusts, he rolled naked in thorn bushes and submerging himself in the frigid waters of an ice-covered pond near his dormitory.

While traveling through thick forests one day, he was caught in a violent storm. As lightening danced about him, he was sure that the God of vengeance was about to exact retribution for his sins. He screamed into the teeth of howling winds, "God, if you spare me, I promise to become a monk!" In the aftermath of the storm, he left law school and entered seminary. His furious father never forgave Marty.

Nevertheless, the coal miner's son threw himself into the monastic life with his usual perfectionistic frenzy. He fastidiously kept all the rules. Nightly he flagellated himself with whips to scourge himself of real or imagined sins. He later wrote, "If anyone could ever get to heaven by being a good monk, surely it would be me."

He was determined to become a theologian who would make God proud. In record time, he earned his doctorate in theology. He was elected to the faculty of one of his nation's premier universities where he became a prolific writer. He gave alms to the poor, and worked tirelessly to improve the living conditions of peasants. But none of that calmed the angst in his guilt-ridden psyche. Years later he confessed, "I lost touch with Jesus as Savior and Comforter, and made him the jailor and hangman of my poor soul."

A frantic Marty went on a pilgrimage to Rome where he hoped to find his salvation. Instead of holiness, he found every kind of debauchery. His disillusionment drove him to the brink of suicide. In a final grasp at earning redemption, he found his way to some rough-hewn marble steps known as *Pilate's Stairs*. Like millions of other pilgrims, Marty crawled up and down

that sacred stairway trying to absolve his sins. He kissed each stone and cried out, *Pater Noster*—"Our Father!" He couldn't remember how many times he climbed up and down those steps on lacerated elbows and knees before he finally collapsed.

Then the little boy who could never please his coal miner father, died. The monk, who could never do enough to please his heavenly Father, was born again. As he lay in a heap of exhaustion, he recalled the words of two men who had worn themselves out trying to perfect their world: the Jewish prophet Habakkuk, and later St. Paul. And now, Martin the monk, weary of forever trying to do enough to earn God's favor, cried out the same words:

"The righteous shall live by faith alone!"

When Martin Luther uttered those words, he ignited the spark of what would become the Reformation. 500 years later, we are desperately in need of the same kind of reformation again.

Martin Luther was a fixer. He tried to fix things with his coal miner father. He tried to fix his inadequacies before God. He tried to fix others. Moses was a fixer too. As we shall see in today's episode of Exodus, he wore himself out, trying to fix his world. I'll bet that most of you are also fixers. Evangelical Christians are especially prone to a Messianic Complex. We mistake Christ's call to evangelize the world as a mandate to fix it. But God has not called us to play Holy Spirit. In the movie *Rudy*, a priest says, "I've learned two things in life: there is a God, and I'm not him." Fixers everywhere ought to heed the warning that Jethro gave to his son-in-law, Moses in Exodus 18:18: "The work is too heavy for you; you cannot handle it alone." The journey to your Promised Land will take enough out of you without your taking on the burden of trying to fix everyone else. The ninth principle of the Exodus is one of the most liberating of all:

**None of us has enough to do enough to fix enough.  
Only *Grace* is amazing enough to fix all that is broken.**

Moses was a compulsive fixer saddled with 3.6 million people who desperately needed to be fixed. No leader has ever been faced with a more daunting task than Moses. These Israelites were coming out of 400 years of slavery. During that time their sense of identity had been erased and their family structures dismantled. Having been harshly mistreated, they distrusted all authority. Their misery had turned them into whiners and complainers. Faced with genocide, they had learned to do whatever it took to survive, no matter how immoral. Dependent on the food doled out by the Egyptians, they had developed a welfare mentality. It's no wonder that they were a rebellious rabble perpetually living on the edge of anarchy.

Moses had about 40 years to turn anarchists into citizens, social outcasts into strong families, a mob into a nation, and moral pygmies into spiritual warriors. All of that had to be done while getting this mass of cantankerous humanity across the most desolate string of deserts on planet earth.

Can you understand why Moses feels overwhelmed? It's only been three months since they left Egypt, and already the wheels are coming off this Exodus. Verse 13 says that the people stood in an endless line everyday, waiting for Moses to fix their broken lives. And it was taking its toll. Jethro warns Moses in verse 18, "You'll only wear yourself out."

Martin Luther exhausted himself trying to fix what he couldn't fix. And so do most of us. As a pastor, I can relate to Moses. Every year 8,000 clergy drop out of the pastorate in America. The number one reason: burnout. Futurist David Zach writes, "This generation is in a frenzy to fix everything that's wrong. It's no wonder that a society with urgency as its emblem has Valium as its addiction." Like Moses, most of us are running ourselves ragged. But none of us has enough to do enough to fix enough. In the words of a nursery rhyme, "...all the king's horses and all the king's men couldn't put Humpty back together again." But that doesn't mean that what is broken can't be fixed. It's just a matter of how we go about it. Luther's life was transformed when he realized that only *Grace* is enough to fix all that is broken. Moses discovered these truths in Exodus 18, and so can we:

### **1. In the shadow of Sinai, you can never do enough to fix enough.**

People reduce Exodus 18 to Jethro teaching Moses effective organizational strategies. It is far deeper than that. This incident in Moses' life reveals the heart of the gospel; what it means to live by grace rather than works.

Look at the context of this story. The Israelites are camped on the edge of the Desert of Sinai. They can see Mount Sinai towering in the distance. Within days they will trek toward that mountain. When you first hear the word Mt. Sinai what immediately comes to mind? **The Law!** Sinai will become the seminal experience in Jewish history. At Mt. Sinai Moses will receive an endless minutia of detailed instruction on feast days, dietary restrictions, animal sacrifices, and rules governing every aspect of Israeli life. At the heart of this list of laws that take the better part of Exodus, Numbers, Leviticus, and Deuteronomy, are the 10 Commandments. In Luke 10:27&28, Jesus summed up the whole Law of God in two commandments: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all strength and with all your mind; and love your neighbor as yourself."

As much as Mt. Sinai towers over the Jewish encampment, so does the Law of God. What motivates Moses? Even though he hasn't yet received the

Law in stone, it is already written on his heart, as it is all our hearts: **love God with everything you have, and love your neighbors as yourself.** But, if you embrace the Law, it will break your heart. You won't be able to stand it if you don't love God enough. It will crush your heart when you see folks not loving God enough. You will weep when you see others in trouble. You will want to fix broken lives. In fact you will wear yourself out, and then go to bed at night discouraged that you didn't do enough to love God or others. That's what Moses did. That's what Martin Luther did. After exhausting her life, Mother Theresa of Calcutta wrote in her diary that despair, over never doing enough to love God or others, caused her to be suicidal.

The Law of God is a good thing. Imagine the paradise this world would be if we could only manage to keep the Ten Commandments. Unhappiness would cease if people really loved God and their neighbors. But here's the problem: **the Law is good, but we aren't.** St. Paul says in Romans 7:25, "So then, I myself in my mind am a slave to God's law, but in the sinful nature a slave to the law of sin." There's too much sin in us to fulfill the demands of the Law. It will break your heart as surely as it shattered Martin Luther and Mother Teresa. None of us has enough to do enough to fix enough.

Moses discovers that **you can't even fix yourself.** Jethro watches Moses exhausting himself trying to fix the problems of 3.6 million Jews. He asks Moses in verse 14, "Why do you alone sit as judge, while all these people stand around you from morning till evening?" Like Moses, we too sit as the judge of those around us. We know exactly what our spouse should do to make our marriage better. Put us in charge of the church, and things would happen. Put us in the Oval Office, and we would get this country humming again. We are addicted to dispensing advice to others.

Moses answers Jethro in verse 15, "Because the people come to me to seek God's will." We are so self-important. Like Moses, we think that we are indispensable to others. But look at Jethro's response to Moses in verse eighteen: "The work is too heavy for you; you cannot handle it alone." Moses needs to come to grips with his own limitations. So do all of us. After spending a lifetime trying to fix himself and everyone else, St. Paul admitted in Romans 7: 24, "What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?"

If you can't fix yourself, surely **you can't fix others.** Verse 13 says, "The people stood around from morning to evening." The line leading to Moses' tent hardly even moved. In verse 18, Jethro captures the impossibility of meeting all the needs in this world: "*You and those people who come to you will only wear yourselves out. The work is too heavy...*" As a pastor, I can go weeks on end without taking a single day off, and still go to bed every night feeling guilty that I didn't do enough. No one performed more miracles than

Jesus, yet when he returned to heaven he left behind plenty of unhealed people. It's okay if we can't heal everyone. Does that mean we give up helping other? No! Like Jesus, we use our brief time on this earth to love God and as many others as we can. Luther wrote, "Even if I knew that tomorrow the world would go to pieces, I would still plant my apple tree."

If you can't fix others, **you won't fix your own family**. The first lines of Exodus 18 tells us that Moses' wife and boys went to visit his father-in-law who lived nearby. Why do you suppose Jethro came back with them? As a pastor, I know the answer. Moses was spending so much time fixing everyone else's problems that he was neglecting his own family. Every pastor's family knows the pain that Moses' wife and kids were feeling. But I'm telling you that even if a people give everything they have to their families, they can't fix them. The greatest faith heroes in the Bible had children who didn't walk with the Lord. The best of spouses and parents don't have enough to do enough to fix the sins embedded in their families.

Above all else, **you can't do enough for God**. In verse 17, Jethro says to Moses, "What you are doing is not good." God has called Moses to lead these people. And now God uses this desert chieftain to tell him that he's not doing a good job. And that is the ultimate problem with God's Law. We might do enough to please some of the people some of the time. We might even be pleased with ourselves as we work ourselves into exhaustion. But we will always fall short of the glory of a perfect God.

I wish we could all love God and others enough to fix all the problems in ourselves and in our world. Moses, no matter how hard you try, you will only wear yourself and others out! Listen to Jethro. In verse 23 he tells Moses that God has commanded a different way.

## **2. Only grace will fix what is broken.**

Jethro gives God's solution in verse nineteen: "Listen now to me and I will give you some advice, and may God be with you. You must be the people's representative before God and bring their disputes to him." You see the first distinction between Law and Grace: "May God be with you." The Law says, "You must be with God." Grace says, "God will be with you." The Law says, "You must come up to Mt. Sinai to find God." Grace says, "God comes down from the heights of heaven to find you." Jethro is calling Moses to a ministry of prayer. That too is grace. The Law says, "You have to carry the load." Grace says, "God will carry the load." What is prayer? It is a recognition that I can't fix myself. I can't fix others. I can't fix my marriage. I can't fix my church. I can't fix my culture. I can't fix my nation. I can't fix what is broken in this world. So I bring my burdens to God and lay them at his feet. At Mt. Sinai, the Law of God dumps a truckload of backbreaking

requirements on me. Like Moses, I am left worn out, and, for all my efforts, everyone is still unhappy with my inability to measure up to their expectations. At Mt. Calvary, Jesus shoulders the load of righteousness I can't fulfill, sins I can't repay, and needs I can't meet. That's amazing grace.

The Law says, "Love God with all your heart, soul, strength and mind. Love your neighbor as yourself." Grace says, "God loves you with all his heart, soul, strength, and mind. God loves you as much as he loves himself." From the very beginning, when we pray to receive Christ as our Lord and Savior, we are saying, "God, I can't manage my salvation. So I bring my sins and lay them at your feet." Every prayer afterwards is a confession that his grace alone is sufficient. He alone can solve the problems of my life, my family, my church, my country, and my world. Martin Luther once said to his wife, "I've got so much to do today. I think I should begin by spending three hours before the Lord in prayer." Another time he said to his students, "Pray and let God worry." The Law is going to bed at night worrying how you are going to fix things. Grace is sleeping through the night while God does the fixing. Elders and deacons, do you want to serve your church well: give your first priority to prayer. Moms and dads, do you want to parent well: give your first priority to praying for your kids. He calls you to obey him and help others, but only he will fix what is wrong with you and others.

### **3. Transformed in God's presence, we bring its transforming power to others.**

Jethro goes on in verse 20, "Teach them the decrees and laws, and show them the way to live and the duties they are to perform." Having prayed, Moses' second priority is to teach. When he comes into God's presence, he will receive God's instructions. He is then to pass them on to the people. Jethro establishes the greatest principles of spiritual leadership: we cannot pass on to others what we don't already possess. But it's not enough for a spiritual leader to teach people the Law of God. If I tell you how to love God and others, I have only informed you. Even if I get passionate about it, I have only inspired you. But teaching alone will not transform. St. Paul refers to it as "*the foolishness of preaching.*"

The book of Exodus tells us that every time Moses went up Mt. Sinai to see the LORD, he came back radiant with God's glory all over his face. But it would soon begin to fade. So Moses put a veil over his face to hide the fact that the glory faded. And so it is with us. We have spiritual mountaintop experiences. A sermon inspires us, a Bible study enlightens us, a worship service fills us with joy, or we go on a mission trip that takes us to a new level. But the glory fades. Pollster George Barna says that 75 percent of Evangelicals says that they haven't had a meaningful spiritual experience in the last year. So preachers try to jazz up their

congregations, telling to love God more. Work harder. Get rid of the sins. Tithe more, serve more, do more, love others more. We don't even realize that we are preaching the Law. But the Law condemns rather than transforms. No wonder there's never revival or reformation.

But we don't have the ministry of Moses. Ours is Grace, not Law. The only time Moses ever kept glory was in Matthew 17, some 1400 years later, when he stood with Jesus on the Mt. of Transfiguration. Grace alone transforms. St. Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 3:17, "And we, who with unveiled faces all reflect the Lord's glory are being transformed into his likeness with ever increasing glory." When we focus on Jesus, we are looking at his grace. What is grace preaching that is different than what Moses teaching? It focuses on God's love, not ours. It focuses on his work, not ours. Rather than saying, "Love God more!" it says, "God loves you even more!" Rather than saying, "Try harder, give more, better!" it says, "Jesus did enough!" It gives all the glory for our salvation and sanctification to God alone. And what happens when we gaze upon the love of God? John 4:19 tells us: "We love him because he first loved us." The more we focus on his amazing grace, the more we are transformed into his likeness. Martin Luther wrote, "We are saved by faith alone, but faith that saves is never alone." Transformation comes when we apprehend his grace. It produces a never-fading holiness of love that draws others to his transforming grace.

#### **4. A community of grace transforms a culture without grace.**

Jethro ends with a third priority in verse twenty-four: "But select capable people..." He goes on to put together an organizational plan where laity takes over the ministry." No mere mortal (even one empowered with Christ's presence) carry the load alone. We all have to band together. The pastor doesn't have enough to do enough to fix enough. Neither does any of us. Even when Jesus faced the horrors of Gethsemane, he needed his disciples to stay near and pray with him. Law says I have to fix everything on my own. Grace says that I can lean on the rest of you, and you can lean on me. A grace-filled Church is filled with people who are so aware of what they lack that they are grateful to be dependent on the grace of others to help see them through. A grace-filled church understands that everyone has been gifted by grace to contribute to advancing the kingdom of God. Together, we share the burdens and fix the problems through mutual dependence on grace. Grace even says we can even allow each other to mess up because God will fix mistakes. He alone will see us through to the Promised Land!

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