

Studies in Exodus No. 29

Exodus 23:20-33

November 20, 2005

The Rev. Dr. Robert S. Rayburn

Text Comment

We have reached the end of this section of laws or covenantal stipulations, what is often referred to as the “Book of the Covenant.” Our paragraph tonight is the conclusion to the Book of the Covenant. It contains a general exhortation to faithfulness on the part of God’s people. They have heard the commandments; now they are being told again *why they should obey*. It is composed, characteristically, both of encouragement and warning. In other words, in short form, what follows in this section are the covenant blessings and curses: the blessings that will ensue if the Lord’s people are faithful to his covenant; the curses that will befall them if they prove unfaithful. Remember, we said that such a section of blessings and curses is typical of the ANE treaty form that has been employed to reveal God’s covenant to Israel. In other words, endings like these were typically part of ANE secular covenants and law codes. The Code of Hammurabi, for example, ends with similar closing remarks. [Cassuto, 305] Each major section of laws in the Pentateuch is followed by such a section of exhortation. You can see this, for example, in Leviticus 26:3-45 and Deuteronomy 28:1-68. In both of those sections, following much longer sections of laws or stipulations, the blessings and curses are enumerated in much more detail.

- v.20 As you know, the Hebrew word for “angel” is simply the word “messenger.” So the question is: is this a reference to the angel of the Lord (that is, is the phrase a periphrasis for the Lord himself – periphrasis is a figure of speech in which a longer, more elaborate phrase is substituted for a simpler, shorter way of saying the same thing – a stylistic device often employed for the sake of emphasis); or does it apply to an angel; or to Moses? Context alone can decide. However, we know elsewhere that “angel of the Lord” refers to the presence of Yahweh himself. The difficulty with taking it to refer to an angel, a supernatural being but not Yahweh himself, is that in all the rest of the history of Israel in the wilderness we are not given any report of this angel, of his speaking to Moses, or of his directing Israel on her journey. What is more, the presence of the Lord with his people was a primary theme in the first 20 chapters of Exodus. “Angel of the Lord” then is a way of the invisible God mediating his presence to his people. For example, in Gen. 24:7 Abraham says to his servant, “The Lord, the God of heaven... will send his angel before you.” But in the narrative that follows there is no reference to an actual angel, but only to the Lord himself, his presence, his blessing of Abraham’s servant. The servant himself even says, “As for me, *the Lord* has led me in the way.” [Cassuto, 305-306]
- v.21 As often in the Bible, rebellion against God’s messenger is the same thing as rebellion against him. Because the messenger brings the Word of the Lord and it is that word that is being disobeyed, God himself is being defied. This statement, to be honest, makes it somewhat more difficult to identify the “messenger” or “angel of the Lord” with Yahweh himself because it seems to distinguish “him” from the “I” of v. 1. Are we left then with

Moses? But verses 20-21 don't *sound* like they refer to a mere man and "angel of the Lord" elsewhere in the Bible and on a number of occasions does unmistakably refer to the Lord's presence made known to men. As one scholar puts it, Yahweh and his *angel* are "obviously one and the same." [Von Rad in Durham, 335] Another says, "in the final analysis, the angel of God is simply God's action." [Cassuto, 305] It is also a way, as we saw in Genesis, of referring to a theophany, a visible appearance of God. So, however unusual a way of speaking, the total context seems to require us to understand "angel of the Lord" as the Lord's presence itself.

- v.24 The "sacred stones" are literally "standing" pillars. As in Hinduism the standing stone represented the male principle in the fertility cult.
- v.26 As often elsewhere in the Bible (the NT as well as the OT) food, health, fertility, and long life are promised as the blessings of a life of faithfulness to God's covenant. This, of course, needs to be set side by side with the Bible's honest acknowledgement of the sufferings of the righteous and the mysteries of life. Still, it was true then and is now that there is much present blessing in following the Lord and living according to his will.
- v.27 Remember Rahab telling the spies that the fear of the advancing Israelites had seized the entire population of Canaan. My terror" is an expression corresponding to the "angel of the Lord" in v. 1. It is as if "terror" were a vanguard marching in front of the hosts of Israel, as the angel of the Lord will go ahead of them in v. 1.
- v.28 In all likelihood the "hornet" here is being used as a metaphor: something that causes fright or panic. Many scholars, however, think that, because the bee or hornet is found on Egyptian heraldry as a symbol of Pharaoh, the reference here is to the Egyptian army which, at this time, made periodic raids into Canaan and so weakened the Canaanites before Israel took them on during the conquest.
- v.30 There are several reasons given for the fact that Israel did not conquer Canaan all at once and once for all. Some others are given in Judges 2:20-3:4.

In Malaysia, during the communist insurgency in the years following World War II, tigers increased alarmingly because no hunter had the leisure or opportunity to deal with them. [Cole, 183]

This statement about Israel's needing to increase to a size sufficient to occupy the land has been appealed to as proof of the need to question the typical translation of 12:37 (coming out of Egypt Israel had 600,000 adult men, besides women and children). The suggestion is that we should render the Hebrew word אֶלֶף (ʾēlōp) "a particular unit, perhaps a military unit, of indeterminate size. The question is whether well more than 2,000,000 Israelites would need to increase in order adequately to fill the land of Canaan. I'm not sure myself what to think about this. The Hebrew word is used in military contexts all the time and may very well have a technical meaning and we also know that even the same military units often vary dramatically in size (e.g. a U.S. Army

division was much larger in the First World War than in the Second and larger than now).

- v.31 That is, of course, in Hebrew, the *yam suph*, the Sea of Reeds, which refers in various contexts to different bodies of water or different parts of an interconnected body of water part of which is known as the Red Sea. Here it seems to refer to the Gulf of Aqaba, which would be the eastern border, at least in the south, while the Sea of the Philistines is the Mediterranean which was the western border. The River is the Euphrates and the desert is the Sinai. These ideal boundaries were realized only briefly under the reigns of David and Solomon.
- v.33 The final two verses, as a summary, form a fitting conclusion to the covenant document. The sparing of Rahab and her family and their settling among the Israelites shows that this extermination of the Canaanites was for religious and moral purposes, not for ethnic purposes. Israel was the instrument of God's judgment. Remember, God had waited many centuries to punish the Canaanites because "their iniquity was not yet full."

The text we have before us this evening requires a theologian to understand and apply to life. Not a professional theologian; I don't mean that. Professional theologians are as likely to go wrong here, or more so. I mean a Christian who comes to the text of Holy Scripture with a thoughtful understanding of biblical teaching and a determination to let the Scripture deliver its message without throwing up impediments in its way. In this sense every Christian should be a theologian, someone capable of understanding the teaching of Holy Scripture as a consistent whole. Good theology is an understanding of biblical teaching in which all its various themes are discovered and integrated into the Bible's own system of truth. Bad theology is invariably a preference for some teaching at the expense of another. We have often said that faithfulness to biblical teaching will require us to hold together truths that are not easy to reconcile and to respect a certain dialectical cast to biblical teaching by which truths are juxtaposed to one another rather than harmonized. Most biblical doctrines, if not all of them, lie at the opposite end of a continuum of truth and produce a tension with the teaching at its opposite end or pole. We know that in regard to certain teaching – e.g. the unity and the triple personality of God; divine sovereignty and human freedom and responsibility; justification by faith and the judgment according to works, etc. – but it is true everywhere else in biblical teaching as well.

And it is profoundly true and true in a complex way here in regard to the subject of this concluding paragraph of the Book of the Covenant. What we have here is an exploration of motive. We have had chapters of commandments, of covenantal stipulations. The Book now closes with an exhortation that amounts to setting out the reasons why Israel ought to obey these commandments and why she should not disobey them. If she obeys, God will go before her and bless her: he will bring her into the Promised Land, he will destroy her enemies, he will give them health and prosperity in every way. The Lord will make of Israel a great nation that controls that entire part of the world. If, on the other hand, they disobey these commandments and betray the covenant, he will not forgive that rebellion. The clear implication, spelled out in great detail in later texts, is that instead of prosperity, the Lord will send ruin and calamity upon his people if they betray his covenant. All of that is implied here in "he will not forgive your

rebellion...” *In other words, the motives set before Israel here, at the end of the Book of the Covenant, are the promise of reward and the threat of punishment.*

Nowadays, the question of motive is again very much in dispute, even in conservative Reformed circles. You will hear Reformed people and even Reformed ministers say that to do good for the sake of reward or to forsake sin for the sake of fear is a betrayal of the doctrine of God’s grace. These are motives, we are being told by some, that are unworthy of the gospel and reduce the Christian life to some seamy sort of commerce: Christians are not spiritual capitalists who are driven by the profit motive.

But what then are we to do with texts like this one? There are, in fact, a great many of them like this, longer and more emphatic both in setting forth the promise of reward for faithfulness and the threat of punishment for disobedience.

Well, there are two primary approaches, both of which draw a distinction between the spiritual world of the OT and that of the New. The idea is that in the New Testament, love and gratitude are the motivations for living a holy life, not the promise of reward or the threat of punishment. The true relationship of Christians to their Savior cannot any longer be conceived in terms of inducements and threats.

1. The first approach is to argue that the appeal to reward and punishment in the covenant is an instance of the more primitive, juvenile, and worldly spirituality of the ancient epoch. In those days, in the era of the law, people were not yet spiritually prepared for higher motives and so the Lord appealed to baser things, things that they could understand and relate to. In the New Testament, in the new spiritual world introduced by Christ and his apostles, our sights are set higher. We act out of the love of God not out of love for ourselves. In the age of the Spirit, truly spiritual motivations have replaced the more worldly ones of the church’s infancy and adolescence. The New Testament sets before us a different motivation for godliness, for faithfulness to God’s covenant than what we find in the Old Testament.

The fatal problem with this argument is that we have the same appeal to reward and punishment as motivation for Christian living in the New Testament as we have in the Old. When Jesus says:

“Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. Many will say to me on that day, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not do [this and that]? Then I will tell them plainly, ‘I never knew you. Away from me you evil doers!’”

Is he not appealing to fear? And when he says,

“I tell you the truth, no one who has left home or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields for me and the gospel will fail to receive a hundred times as much in this present age (homes, brothers, sisters, mothers, children and fields – and with them, persecutions) and in the age to come eternal life.”

Is he not appealing to the hope of reward? When the Apostle Paul says to the children in the church in Ephesus:

“Children obey your parents in the Lord for this is right. ‘Honor your father and mother’ – which is the first commandment with a promise – ‘that it may go well with you and that you may enjoy long life on the earth.’”

How is that different from the motivation laid before Israel in Exodus 23:25-26? And there are a good many texts like that in the New Testament.

2. The second approach is a variation on the same theme. What the New Testament shows us are higher and lower motivations and that the more spiritual a person one becomes, the higher will be his or her motivations. The OT saints, because they lived in an age before fulfillment (many would say before the fullness of the Holy Spirit was granted to believers), contented themselves largely with lower motivations. Those motivations still exist, but a Christian should be rising to higher things. Love and gratitude ought to be the reason why he lives as he lives, not the fear of punishment or the prospect of reward, motivations that still have the odor of selfishness clinging to them.

The problem with this account of motivation in the New Testament is not only that the NT writers never actually say this, they never teach that there are higher and lower motivations and that we should strive for the higher, nor is it only that Christ himself and his apostles often appeal to these very motives of fear and reward in their own teaching of the way of Christian discipleship, *but those representative Christians appeal to those so-called lower motivations themselves!*

Jesus did himself, if you remember. He went to the cross, we read in Hebrews 12:2 “for the joy set before him...” There were happy things for him in obedience to his Father and he sought them by his obedience. The Father, if you remember, promised the Son the nations for his inheritance if he would fulfill his mission in the world. There was a reward offered him should he fulfill his mission as the world’s Redeemer. We could go on.

But, take Paul in 2 Cor. 5. Why did he acquit himself so faithfully in his work as the apostle to the Gentiles? Well one reason, he himself says, is this:

“For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive what is due him for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad. Since, then, we know what it is to fear the Lord, we try to persuade men.”

In another place Paul said, “Woe to me if I preach not the Gospel,” and in still another he warns ministers that if they do their work poorly they will lose their reward (1 Cor. 3:15).

Now, I do not mean to suggest at all that love should not be a powerful motivation in any Christian life, and that gratitude should not be either. Quite the contrary. They were for Christ

who loved us and gave himself for us. Those same motivations are set before us countless times, interestingly as often and as powerfully in the Old Testament as in the New. There is a sense in which no verse so perfectly sums up all that the Bible has to say about God's covenant and the Christian life than the Lord's utterance in the Upper Room:

“If you love me, you will obey what I command.” [John 14:15]

The author of Psalm 116 wrote:

“I love the Lord, for he heard my voice; he heard my cry for mercy. Because he turned his ear to me, I will call on him as long as I live.”

“How can I repay the Lord for all his goodness to me? I will lift up the cup of salvation and call on the name of the Lord. I will fulfill my vows to the Lord in the presence of all his people.”

But that is simply the same mind and the same heart as Paul expressed when he wrote, at the beginning of Romans 12:

“Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God – this is your spiritual act of worship.”

C.T. Studd the 19th century missionary was summing up a large body of biblical teaching and illustration when he said so memorably: “If Jesus Christ be God and died for me, then no sacrifice can be too great for me to make for him.”

But that we love the Lord and live out of that love; that we are grateful to him for his grace and for his sacrifice and live to demonstrate that gratitude hardly means that we do not also live out of fear and out of a hope for reward. A very good example is provided by the family relationship. After all, the Christian is someone who is a *child of God*.

I loved my father, but I feared him at the same time. This is typical of well-ordered homes. I probably could hardly have separated those strands of motivation at work in my mind and heart. The love and the fear of him were together. Sometimes they operate singly – you fear his punishment in the prospect of something you are thinking of doing or you think of some way to please him because you love him – but sometimes they are intertwined. And when I was not thinking directly about why I did what I did, the influence of my father and both my love for him and fear of him, deeply rooted in my heart, worked upon my conscience. And, as a child growing up, which one of us did not learn to do things, even for our parents whom we loved, in hope of some reward. Whether it was a “Well-done!” or a clap on the back, or whether it was something they had promised us if a job was done, we did not regard that then and do not now as something foreign to a loving family or a loving relationship.

We human beings are complex creatures and motives lie deep within us and exert a powerful influence upon us. We are creatures with a will and our Creator is a just judge. Reward and punishment are woven into the fabric of our existence. The Christian life is difficult to live. We

need all the motivation we can get. And the Bible gives us motivation by the basketful and motivations of all different kinds. If one motive does not work in a particular instance, another will. What difference does it make, after all, for what reason one keeps God's commandments and serves him, so long as the motive is pure, that is, a true motive supplied by the Word of God itself. It is perhaps not wrong to wish that we could do all things for love's sake, but it is pure sentiment to suppose that such a thing is possible. If it were the Bible would not be written as it is. We are not only lovers, we are workers in this world and achievers.

Let me finish with an example. You have unbelievers around you, unsaved, lost people. You know very well that you have an obligation to represent Christ and the Gospel to them as persuasively as you can. It is your duty, so far it depends upon you, to *win souls*. "He that wins souls is wise," the Bible says. But that is difficult work. Unbelievers, probably most of the time, do not appreciate you talking to them about your religion. You want to represent Christ and the faith well, but you're not sure you can do as good a job as ought to be done. You fear rejection. You know how it is. So what will motivate us to do what we ought to do on behalf of the unsaved around us?

Well, some speak of loving the lost. We should love them and have a heart that is broken at the prospect of their damnation. We should; we definitely should have such a heart. But do we and can we? I think there are some who do. Think of the Apostle Paul wishing himself damned if only his fellow Jews might believe in Jesus and be saved. It is hard not to find that selflessness, that measure of love breathtaking. But was it always so, even for Paul.

In 2 Cor. 5:10-11, in talking about why he sought to persuade Gentile men (and Paul may well have found Jews easier to love than Gentiles, being a Jew himself), he said that it was his knowledge of the impending judgment of his life by the Lord Christ. It was the prospect of receiving what was due him for the things done in the body whether good or bad that motivated him to fulfill his calling as an evangelist. "Knowing, therefore, the fear of the Lord, we try to persuade men."

I have, frankly, always found that text very comforting. Far from having a powerful love for the lost, personally I have trouble loving the found! And I know that others, many others, including many great evangelists have felt the same. Here is Mary Slessor, the famous Scottish woman missionary to Calabar in West Africa, in what is now Nigeria. Writing to a friend back in Scotland she says:

"I received to-day your very kind letter and the snowdrops and crocuses, so refreshing. It is such a privilege to get a letter from a Christian. This land is dark, and to me 'dry and parched.' The surrounding heathenism has such a depressing influence and the slow progress (which is almost a necessary consequence of their state of utter debasement) makes one heartsick. Oh! for power! Of! for a heart full of love to Jesus and these perishing ones for His sake, for, Oh! one cannot love them for their own." [D.P. Thomson, *Women of the Scottish Church*, 317]

What motivated such a woman and the multitudes like her that spread out over the world in the 19th and 20th centuries, so many of whom suffered terribly or died for the cause of the gospel,

and the fruit of whose missionary labor is now seen in the ascendant Christianity of the two-thirds world? Well, for some, perhaps it was a heart of love for the lost. For many others, it was more love for Christ and a way of loving him. But for them, at the same time, and for others still more, it was fear of God's judgment and the hope of reward that set them to doing such difficult things for the sake of the kingdom of God. And, perhaps especially, it was that hope of reward and that fear of judgment that kept them at that wearying and discouraging work long after others would have given up and gone home. It is not for nothing that generations of Christians have been nerved and steeled to obedience and to courage and faithfulness in the fire by the simply prospect of the Lord's telling them some day, "Well done! good and faithful servant."

We have not exhausted the theological knowledge necessary to understand the text we have read. We have not mentioned the problem of reconciling God's promise of temporal rewards with the actual experience of God's people. He promises food and drink, but some believers have starved and some are starving today; he promises health and some are sick; he promises fertility and some faithful Christians weep for the want of children; he promises a long life and some Christians die young. There are biblical ways of understanding those promises in view of the realities of believing life, but that is another question for another day.

Tonight we say this: there are many reasons to live a Christian life, to keep God's commandments, and to be faithful to his covenant. You and I need them all. Among those reasons are God's promise of reward for those who are faithful to him and his warnings of punishment for those who betray him. You and I should not live a day of our lives without thinking, at least a thought or two, about whether we are living so as to have God's reward and whether we are living so as to invite his punishment. There are other reasons to be faithful Christians, but these are valid reasons that God himself has laid before us times without number in his Holy Word.

Calvin has a recondite way of putting the way of Christian discipleship. He said, "presume on the veracity of God." That is, act in confidence that what God says is and must be true. Live your life, make your decisions each day, that is, believing that God will reward your faithfulness and would punish your infidelity to his covenant. It is the right way, the safe way, the happy way to live. Presume on the veracity of God! He promises here and all through his Word to lavish favors on his children who serve him and do his will!