

# The Law Of Life

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- [ 0 : 0 0 ] Well, we're in a section of Exodus now that for a number of weeks is going to dive deep into the law that God gave to ancient Israel. This is not the only place that we find law.
- In fact, the books following this, Deuteronomy, Leviticus, all of those are filled with these ancient laws. And I want to tell you for a second about another one of them I came across in Leviticus 15, a law about infectious diseases.
- It's one of many. It's tucked away in the pages of Leviticus. You wouldn't find it unless you were looking for it. And it tells people how to cleanse themselves if they've been in contact with someone with an infectious disease in Israel.
- And one of the details, as you read it carefully, it says that you are to wash your hands in running water. And we read that and we go, well, that makes sense, right?
- If you've been touching an infectious person with a disease, you should wash your hands in running water. Maybe use some hand sanitizer if it's available. Because we know about germs, right? Especially after COVID.
- [ 1 : 0 5 ] But, you know, we didn't actually know about germs until kind of at least, well, the last century. Before that, people didn't actually know that germs were a thing. And it was only actually in 1846 that a doctor in Vienna discovered that if the other doctors who have been treating patients with infectious diseases washed their hands, not just in the basins that they were used to, but under running water, it just so happened that the death rate in the hospitals went from 30% down to 2% just for that small change in getting doctors to wash their hands under running water.
- That was in 1846. All right? And all that time before that, where people were dying because doctors didn't know to wash their hands under running water, all that time, for those thousands of years, in the pages of Scripture was an instruction saying you should use running water.
- But that law was ignored because it was considered obsolete. It was considered amongst all the laws to Israel. What bearing do they have on our life? And yet that law was far more important than people thought.
- Why? Well, because it was given by a God who knows how this world works. See, God knew about germs way before we did.
- And I want to say that I think there's a similar thing can be said of all the ancient laws that we read about in the Bible that God gave ancient Israel.
- [ 2 : 4 9 ] The laws that we're reading about here in Exodus. God gave these laws. God came up with them. They came from the mind of a God who knows how this world works much better than we do.
- And now we come across these laws. We read them. And, you know, the easiest thing is just to page a few pages until we come to the story again and we see what happened to Israel next and just skip over them. And I don't know when last you studied the Levitical law code for your personal quiet time.
- Not many people do. We think these laws are primitive. They're about slaves. They're about oxen and bulls. And we think they're irrelevant to us.

After all, we are no longer under this law in the new covenant. This is the old covenant law to ancient Israel. We are not ancient Israelites. And so it's very easy to think that we can just skip this law.

But when we stop and read it carefully and remind ourselves this is God's word and he preserved these laws for us today for a reason.

[ 3 : 50 ] And when we dive into them, like we're going to do for the next few weeks, we discover that they contain a treasure trove of deep wisdom from a God who knows how this world works much better than we do.

And that's also the reason that actually if you look at most modern laws, they're based on the foundations that were laid down here in Exodus.

Far from being outdated or primitive, we find that we learn something vital for the lifestyle that God wants from the people that he calls to serve him today.

And so keep your Bibles open at Exodus 21. And let's discover what laws about slaves and bulls can teach us in 2023.

And as we look at these laws, which this section of laws we're looking at this morning is largely around murder and assault. And the laws around that in ancient Israel.

[ 4 : 56 ] As we look into them, we're going to see two principles that come out of them that apply today in our world just as much as they did then. And the first principle, the first thing that we learn as we look at this law is that it teaches us about the value of life.

God's law teaches us about the value of life. So scholars have studied ancient law codes of not just Israel, but the nations surrounding Israel.

There were other civilizations, nations at the time that the Israelites received this law. And all these ancient civilizations all had similar laws around, you know, you're not allowed to kill someone.

And you're not allowed to assault them and you're not allowed to steal their property. So it's law that was in other ancient cultures, law that protected life and property.

But when you compare this law of ancient Israel to the laws of the other ancient cultures, there are certain things that stand out that are unique to this law.

[ 6 : 04 ] And one of the major things that stands out is that the law God gave Israel was law that assumed that life itself was valuable no matter whose it was.

And that was one of the unique features of it. For example, no other laws around in the other ancient cultures had laws that protected slaves. Why would you want to protect your slave?

You know, that wasn't done in the ancient world. Slaves had no rights in the ancient world normally, but in Israel they did. Israel was unique, a country, in that their slaves had rights.

It was unheard of. So for example, I mean, verse 12, which is the highlighted law, which is then unpacked and exceptions are made.

But the law in verse 12 is whoever strikes a person so that he dies must be put to death. And what we discover as we read on that applied to striking slaves as well. So these laws included slaves.

[ 7 : 09 ] They protected slaves. Verse 16 as well. Look at this. Whoever kidnaps a person must be put to death, whether he sells him or the person is found in his possession. So that is the kind of slavery that became very popular even in modern history.

In fact, it's still done today. Which was outlawed in Israel. They couldn't have slaves in that way. And then verse 26 and 27 is interesting. Also, unheard of in other ancient law codes, when a man strikes the eye of his male and female slave and destroys it, he must let the slave go free in compensation for his eye.

If he knocks out a tooth of his male and female slave, he must let the slave go free in compensation for his tooth. Now this was the perfect outcome for a slave who had been assaulted by his master and who had been abused by his master.

He gets his freedom. He gets to walk away from his master. No slave could do that in the ancient world. But laws in Israel protected slaves. And they gave rights to slaves.

Same as children. Now children in the ancient world were disposable. They really were. They had no rights. But in Israel they did.

[ 8 : 22 ] They were protected under the same law as adults were. As well as women. Who in the ancient world also had very few rights.

But here we see that there's laws specifically protecting women and specifically protecting pregnant women. Did you notice that? Look at verse 22 to 23 again.

When men get in a fight and hit a pregnant woman so that her children are born prematurely but there is no injury, the one who hit her must be fined as the woman's husband demands from him and he must pay according to judicial assessment.

If there is an injury, then you must give life for life. Okay, this seems strange. I mean, did women often get involved in fights between men, especially when they were pregnant?

Who knows? But this is actually an example of case law. We still use it in law courts today. Case law is when there was a specific scenario that a law was established around that all other similar cases can be judged by.

[ 9 : 34 ] And this is therefore an example of case law. It seems quite specific. But it was an example that lawyers in Israel would use to judge similar cases.

And what it tells us, what this particular case and the law established around it tells us, is not only that God values the life of unborn children, which is an important takeaway in today's world.

There is a question around whether the harm mentioned here, you know, where there is harm, was to mother or to child and mother, which is how I understand it to be.

So this law is actually protecting the life and it's encouraging people to take seriously the value of the life that is inside that pregnant woman.

But what's interesting as well is that even if there was no harm to mother or child, if you compare this to the other laws of assault, hitting a pregnant woman had a higher penalty than normal assault, even if there was no harm.

[ 10 : 43 ] There was still a fine to be paid. There was still a consequence. Now why do you think that is? Why do you think assaulting a pregnant woman carried a higher penalty in Israel than just assaulting anyone else?

Well, I think it's because in making this law, God is placing a special hedge of protection around women who carried new life inside them.

Because life itself was sacred. And so the bearers of that sacred life must be protected. God wanted His people to go, when they see a pregnant woman, to go, Oh, careful guys, make way.

She's carrying life. Be careful with her. Would you like a seat, ma'am? Can I get you anything? That's the kind of attitude God wanted to cultivate amongst His people.

Because this is a woman who was carrying sacred life inside her. And life is sacred. God, you see, in all these laws is trying to train His people, His new people that He's taken out of slavery and He's preparing to have this special task in the world.

[ 11 : 52 ] He's training them first and foremost to value life itself. That is something that other cultures didn't do. That is something that our world still doesn't do. And yet God's people were being trained through this law to see life as sacred.

And to value it highly. Another way, as we read through this law that God trained His people to value life, were laws for culpable homicide or negligence.

That was also unheard of in ancient law codes. But it is something we see in the law today, largely because it's in the Bible. Culpable homicide or negligence, which basically means you maybe didn't kill someone, but your actions led to their death or your inaction or negligence led to their death.

Even then, because life is sacred, you would be guilty of that. And so we see laws like that, for example, in verse 28 to 29. Have a look in your Bibles.

All about the bulls or the oxen in my translation. It goes like this. When an ox gores a man or woman to death, the ox must be stoned and its meat may not be eaten, but the ox's owner is innocent.

[ 13 : 09 ] So that's interesting. So in the case of an accident where the ox kills someone, but it was an accident, normally the family would then go and get vengeance on the owner of the ox, stone him to death or something.

But God's law says, no, it was an accident. Just chill. Okay, I know it's a terrible thing, but it's not his fault. But it goes on, verse 29. However, if the ox was in the habit of goring and its owner had been warned, yet does not restrain it and it kills a man or woman, the ox must be stoned and its owner must also be put to death.

And that was obviously then seen as negligence. And these laws that accounted for culpable homicide and negligence, they were ahead of their time. And what they did is they trained God's people to think, to really think carefully about whether anything they were doing was endangering the life of someone else.

It was the first time in the ancient world that people had to sit down and think, okay, is the way that I'm looking after my ox maybe endangering the life of someone else? Well, let me change what I'm doing.

Let me put it in a pen. Let me tie it up because life is valuable. And I can't just play fast and loose with other people's lives. This was the kind of attitude that God wanted to cultivate in His people.

[ 14 : 35 ] They were people who took life seriously. And this was one of the marks of God's people in a savage ancient world.

I mean, look at some of the stuff that people did in the ancient world. How little they valued life. How disposable it was. They sacrificed their children at altars. They had all kinds of abuse going on to slaves and women.

And this law was so ahead of its time. And it was to mark out God's people from the savage world around them. To be people who valued life and protected it no matter whose it was.

So that's how God's people were to stand out back then. To be people who really valued life. But you know what? It still is the way God's people are to stand out in a world that still doesn't value life.

It's to be the way we stand out. People who take the Bible seriously. People who follow God. People through whom God is enacting His plans in the world.

[ 15 : 45 ] How are we to stand out? Well, the first way as we look at this law is how we see life itself. And how we value life. And how we care for the lives of other people.

So what does that look like? Well, in the public sphere, it looks like defending life. Making sure legislation and laws still uphold and defend life.

Irrespective of a person's class or economic value or in our country, their race. Irrespective of whether they're born or not.

And we do that. And where necessary, we'll engage with policy making. Because we know life itself is sacred.

And it's our job, if we're engaging in this world, to defend it as much as we can. Not just our lives, but the lives of the people around us. It's a sacred thing given by God. Whether it's an unborn baby.

[ 16 : 44 ] Or whether it's the beggar at your gate. That life is valuable. It's not something that can just be ignored. Or disposed of. And if it's within your power to protect that life.

You must. Because you're one of God's people. And that's one of the things that marks us out from the world. Is that we see life as valuable. And we treat every life, every person made in God's image.

As someone who is sacred. When last did you treat the beggar at your gate? As a valuable life that is sacred in God's eyes. That's what it looks like publicly.

But also privately in our own lives. It's how we run our lives. We must take responsibility for the lives of others. And not just think about our own lives.

And looking after our own lives and nuclear family. But how do our actions affect the lives of the people we share this world with? How do we use our possessions in a responsible way?

[ 17 : 48 ] How do we apply, for example, this law about oxen? Goring people. I mean, anybody own an ox here? Nobody's bought an ox from ShopRite recently?

No? We don't own oxen. So this law we just ignore. But actually, you know what we do own? We own cars. And the same principle applies.

What do we do with our cars to make sure that we're not endangering the lives of the people around us? Well, I'll tell you what. You don't WhatsApp when you're driving, for example. You don't go over the speed limit in a suburban area where there could be children running around.

You check the tread of your tires and make sure it's not running thin. So that you don't get into an unnecessary accident. And you do these things not only for your safety, but for the safety of the people around you.

Because we value life. You see how many ways these laws of ancient Israel actually filter through into our own lives. And there's many other ways. That we show that we uphold and value life.

[ 18 : 56 ] Just like God was teaching His people in ancient Israel to do. And that was the first thing that stands out in these laws. Is they teach us about the value of life.

But there's another way that God taught His people to see life as sacred. And that is in the consequences that we read in these laws.

The appropriate consequences for taking life. It wasn't a small thing. If you took the life of another. Or if you were responsible for someone else losing their life in ancient Israel.

It was no small thing. And we read that most of the time, the penalty was death. Now when we read about the death penalty, immediately we're made uncomfortable, aren't we?

The modern mind thinks that the death penalty is savage. It's a vestige from an ancient savage world.

[ 19 : 58 ] And we shouldn't have the death penalty today. It's savage. It's so old fashioned. Now by the way, these are the same people who think that ripping a baby limb from limb is okay. Which is ironic. They say you can't kill people.

You know, if you killed a criminal, that would undervalue their life. You know, you can't treat life like that. But actually, it's the other way around.

Here, in the Bible, God commands the death penalty not because life was not valuable. But because it was. Because life was sacred. And so, he taught his people to take extreme measures to protect lives.

And sometimes, life itself is the only payment for taking the sacred life of another. But we also see, as we read these laws, that while it was a heavy penalty, it wasn't unfair.

And it wasn't without considering mitigating circumstances. That's another thing that stands out in Israel's law. Mitigating circumstances. And again, it was way ahead of its time that it specified.

[ 21 : 11 ] I wonder if you noticed as we looked through it. It specified different degrees of homicide. You know, you get first degree murder, second degree, third degree murder. You get different degrees in modern law.

That came from here. That came from the Bible. This idea of not all murder is the same. To be fair. To make sure that, you know, accidental killing had an appropriate consequence that was different to premeditated, for example.

So, let's look at an example. From verse 12 to 13. Have a look at this. Whoever strikes a person so that he dies must be put to death.

Verse 13. But, if he did not intend any harm, and yet God allowed it to happen, I will appoint a place for you where he may flee.

This was also a unique feature in Israelite law. They became later cities of refuge where a person who was responsible for the death of another, but it wasn't premeditated, could flee to these cities.

[ 22 : 18 ] And then they couldn't be killed by the vengeful family of the deceased person, which was the norm, by the way, in ancient culture. However, if for any reason you killed another, what would happen is that their family would then have a vendetta against you and your family and get vengeance.

It was called blood vengeance, and it was a very common thing in the ancient world, but not in Israel. These laws actually stopped blood vengeance from happening, because what happened then is that it just escalated, and it became like the mafia, where you kill someone, and they kill you and your family.

And then your extended family go back and kill them and, like, the three families. And then it just escalates, and there's this cycle of violence. But not in Israel. God stopped that process before it started and introduced the idea of due process, which is, again, another thing we have in modern law.

There's so many things, there's so many principles in this law that have actually filtered through thousands of years later in the justice system today. And another one is that the punishment needed to fit the crime, as taught in the famous eye for an eye passage.

Look at verse 23 to 25. Now, this is often, again, misunderstood to be an example of savage, old-fashioned law.

[ 23 : 54 ] But if we read it carefully and we look what Jesus says about it later, we realize that the emphasis of this law was actually about not going too far.

Not issuing a punishment that was beyond the crime. So the emphasis basically here is, if someone takes your eye, you can't take more than their eye, which is normally the case.

You would go after them and you would make them hurt even more than they hurt you. But God's law says, no, there is a limit to the punishment that the person has to be under.

The punishment needed to fit the crime as opposed to this escalating cycle of violence. And that is why when Jesus hones in on the spirit of the law, that's what he does, by the way, in Matthew 5, in the Sermon on the Mount, the famous Sermon on the Mount, what Jesus does is he takes the law that we're reading here in Exodus and he drills down to the spirit underneath that law.

And the intent underneath that law. And when he gets to this one, he actually teaches that the real spirit of this law, and if you wanted to take this law to the extreme, it's about not retaliating at all.

[ 25 : 14 ] And not taking the law into your own hands, which we all want to do. So, why don't you turn to Matthew 5 and let's see how Jesus now applies this law that we're reading to us, to his people.

Matthew 5. We're going to be looking from verse 38.

Matthew 5 from verse 38. You have heard that it was said, an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.

But I tell you, don't resist an evildoer. On the contrary, if anyone slaps you on your right cheek, turn to him the other also.

By the way, this is not Jesus canceling the law and saying, the law of the Old Testament doesn't apply, I'm going to give you a new law.

[ 26 : 25 ] That's what people normally understand this to be. But if you look at all the other ones, this is actually Jesus intensifying God's law and drilling it down to the actual spirit and the intent behind it.

And here, the spirit and the intent of the law about the eye for an eye and not taking the law into your own hands and taking it to the extreme, the spirit and the intent of that is non-retaliation.

God doesn't want his people to retaliate and have these vendettas and take life into their own hands. And Jesus says, well, if you want to do that to the extreme, then when someone slaps you on the right, not only should you not then have a vendetta against them and get revenge, but you should just turn your cheek and let him slap you on the left as well.

Now, how easy is that? How easy when someone insults you or affronts you or offends you, how easy is it for you to just not strike back?

And that's hard enough, isn't it? To not get any kind of revenge. But then to let them continue to do that, well, that's very hard to do.

[ 27 : 38 ] And it's very hard, basically, not to escalate the situation. Because when someone offends us, when someone assaults us, we want revenge. We want them to know that we're in the wrong.

We want to see them pay. That's our natural instinct. And Jesus, very strangely, is saying, no, don't seek that.

But what about justice? What about the law, Jesus? You know, shouldn't they pay? Basically, Jesus is saying, yes, but it's not your job to make them pay.

That's God's job. That's the point here. The only way we can take the spirit of this law seriously is if we trust that God will do justice in his time to everyone who deserves it.

In fact, Romans 12, you don't have to turn there, but let me read to you what Paul says in Romans 12, same thing as Jesus is saying here, Romans 12, verse 19, friends, do not avenge yourselves.

[ 28 : 41 ] Instead, leave room for God's wrath. Because it is written, vengeance belongs to me, I will repay. That's a New Testament teaching. Do not avenge yourself. Vengeance is not your job.

It's God's job. God is the God of justice. He will do justice. It's not up to you, unless, of course, you're in the justice system, which is one of the means through which God does justice before the day of judgment, where he will do perfect justice.

He uses means, and those means include justice systems in countries and governments. But it's not your job personally to take the law into your own hands.

God will do that. Now, problem is that, well, that's nice in theory, but do we see that in practice?

Do we see the justice system actually working to bring criminals to book properly? You know, God promises justice, but where is it?

[ 29 : 45 ] Anybody watch Andre de Reuter's interview this week? Okay? Okay? If you haven't, it's quite eye-opening about the state of corruption in our country and why we have load shedding so often, and because of criminal syndicates, not just stealing vast sums of money, but assassinating people who get in their way.

It's happening in our country. Where's the justice that we're promised? You know, if God promises that there will be justice and we must not take vengeance because we must leave justice up to Him, the natural question is, well, where is it?

People are getting away with murder, literally. People are getting away with murder. And that's the point where you've got to stop and remember, so are you.

So are you. You're also getting away with murder. Look at Matthew 5 again. Because when we consider the spirit of the law, what God really cares about, look at what Jesus says in Matthew 5, just a few verses before we read earlier, Matthew 5 verse 21.

And I want you to let these words sink in. Because we've just looked at God's ancient law about murder and how serious it is, right?

[ 31 : 17 ] Whew, we must never do that. We must never commit that. Because look at, you know, God takes murder pretty seriously. Just as well I'm not a murderer. Well, look what Jesus says. Matthew 5 verse 21.

You have heard that it was said to our ancestors, do not murder. And whoever murders will be subject to judgment.

But I tell you, everyone who is angry with his brother or sister will be subject to judgment. Whoever insults his brother or sister will be subject to the court.

Whoever says you fool will be subject to hellfire. This is the words of Jesus. This is how he takes the law of murder.

And none of us can say we've never done that. None of us can say we've never devalued someone's life with our words and our attitudes.

[ 32 : 17 ] Maybe we didn't stab them in the back with a knife, but we've done it in our mind. We've done it in our words. We've done it in our thoughts. We've all broken God's law of life.

We've all considered life as not valuable. The life of someone else and how we've treated them. Let's be honest. And then what Jesus says later in Matthew.

Matthew 12 verse 36. If that's not enough to really get you gulping. 12 verse 36 says, I tell you that on the day of judgment people will have to give an account for every careless word they speak.

See, God's law is far more serious and far more applicable to us than we think. It is far more perfect than we think. And its standard is much higher than we think because God's law, Jesus teaches us, goes right to our heart.

And when we go there and we look at our hearts, what we realize is we've all broken God's law. And so it's just as well that Jesus went on to practice what he preached about non-retaliation.



[ 33 : 36 ] Isn't it? He embodied it. Instead of giving us what we justly deserve, Jesus embodied what non-retaliation looks like in himself.

I want to read you the words, how Peter puts it. 1 Peter 2.23. Don't have to turn there. Just listen to these words about Jesus. When he was insulted, he did not insult in return.

When he suffered, he did not threaten, but entrusted himself to the one who judges justly.

You see, Jesus said to us, you don't need to take the law into your own hands because God will do justice. We go, oh, but that's so hard to do. Jesus says, let me show you what that looks like.

And then he let himself be the subject of unjust judgment, unjust, corrupt court.

[ 34 : 36 ] We complain about load shedding and corruption in the government. Jesus was put on the cross because of corrupt leaders, and yet he still didn't speak out.

He still didn't retaliate. He let it happen to him. Why? Well, the next verse in 1 Peter 2 tells us.

He himself bore our sins in his body on the cross so that having died to sins, we might live for righteousness.

He had every right to call down legions of angels on his accusers and do justice, but he let injustice take its course to save sinners from rightful justice.

God's justice. To save you and me from the consequences of how we've broken God's law time and time again. While at the same time, and this is the glory of the gospel, he did not compromise God's law.

[ 35 : 49 ] God's law was still uphold. God's law. Death was still the penalty. It's just that he took it instead of you and me.

And that is the glory of the gospel. And that is where the gospel is unique amongst all other religions in the world. God's law. God's law. In that it saves us from the consequences of sin while still upholding justice for sin.

Nowhere else will you find that. The gospel of Christ, therefore, is the only way that God's law can be kept and you can be saved at the same time.

And let me tell you, God's law will be kept. It cannot be escaped. And so the only way God's law will be kept and you can still go free is through what Jesus did for you on the cross.

By himself letting injustice happen to him. And you know why he did that? Because he values your life.

[ 36 : 56 ] He teaches us to value life, but he also shows that. He values your life so much that he gave his life to save it. God values your life.

He doesn't want you to die. Even though his law calls for the death of sinners, God doesn't want you to die. And that's why he sent his son to take that punishment for you.

He wants you, therefore, to embrace what Jesus did for you. Not to hold him at arm's length, but to embrace Jesus. To fall down and say, Lord, you are my savior and my king.

And not so that you can now ignore God's law and say, oh, I'm saved, now I can do what I want. No. So that, Peter says, so that you might live for righteousness.

So that you might truly now live a life that keeps the heart of God's law and be one of God's people who uphold the law and value life.

[ 37 : 55 ] But also, at the same time, show true mercy to those who don't deserve it in our lives. Because we were shown mercy when we didn't deserve it.

And so will we be those people in this coming week who go out and show the world the true nature of God's law. Upholding life, but also showing mercy as Jesus showed to us.

Let's pray. Lord, we thank you that the gospel is so beautiful and unique in that it shows us the true nature of your law.

That it is upheld. That it cannot be compromised. And yet, at its very heart is mercy for sinners. And Lord, as sinners who, in this period of Lent, are encouraged to acknowledge and just be real about our sinfulness, we acknowledge that we need the gospel so much.

We are lawbreakers at heart. But we thank you for Jesus. Lord Jesus, we thank you that you didn't retaliate when you were arrested, when you were betrayed, when you were unjustly sentenced.

[ 39 : 24 ] And you did that to save us from the consequences of God's law so that we might live for righteousness. And we pray, Lord, that you would empower us to do that now as we go out into this world.

Lord, help us to be people who show the world who you truly are by upholding life, but showing great mercy at the same time.

Help us to do that. Help us each to know what that looks like in our own lives, practically at work, at home, with the beggar at the gate. Lord, help us to be your people as you call us to be in Jesus' name.

Amen.