

I STRETCH OUT MY HANDS TO YOU

SERIES: EXODUS - JOURNEY TO FREEDOM



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Exodus 20:22–23:19
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Exodus 20:22–23:19

We were born with spiritual thirst. Spend a few minutes alone without doing anything, and you'll probably feel it. You will probably at some point feel the urge to do something, read something, watch something, or pick up your phone. Resist the urge, and you will probably feel spiritual thirst in a more intense way.

In his memoir *Surprised by Joy*, C.S. Lewis recounts a moment, before he came to faith, when he stood beside a flowering red current bush on a summer day and was overwhelmed by a feeling of desire that came to him without warning, “as if from a depth of not years but of centuries”:

It is difficult to find words strong enough for the sensation which came over me; Milton's “enormous bliss” of Eden . . . comes somewhere near it. It was a sensation, of course, of desire; but desire for what? . . . [A]nd before I knew what I desired, the desire itself was gone, the whole glimpse withdrawn, the world turned commonplace again, or only stirred by a longing for the longing that had just ceased. It had taken only a moment of time; and in a certain sense everything else that had ever happened to me was insignificant in comparison.¹

What do we do with desire?

Exodus 20:22-23:19 constitutes the Book of the Covenant (Exodus 24:7) It contains ordinances that apply the Ten Commandments, or Ten Words, to specific situations. The prologue and epilogue, which prohibit idolatry and prescribe worship, form bookends around the forty-two ordinances, which concern relationships in the covenant community:

- A Prohibition against idolatry (Exodus 20:23)
- B Prescription for worship (Exodus 20:24-26)
 - X Ordinances (Exodus 21:1-23:12)
- A' Prohibition against idolatry (Exodus 23:13)
- B' Prescription for worship (Exodus 23:14-19)

Turn away from false gods and worship the true God. Or, as Jesus puts it, “repent and believe” (Mark 1:15).

Worshiping God inspires us to relate well to people, who have been made in the image of God.

The Ten Commandments, or Ten Words, features love for God first (commandments one through four) and love for others second (commandments five through ten). The Book of the Covenant, an outworking of the Ten Words, features love for God first and last, with love for others in the middle. Love for others is surrounded by love for God. Loving others begins and ends with worship—in the Book of the Covenant, literally.

What the patriarchs did

Exodus 20:22-26:

And the LORD said to Moses, “Thus you shall say to the people of Israel: ‘You have seen for yourselves that I have talked with you from heaven. 23 You shall not make gods of silver to be with me, nor shall you make for yourselves gods of gold. 24 An altar of earth you shall make for me and sacrifice on it your burnt offerings and your peace offerings, your sheep and your oxen. In every place where I cause my name to be remembered I will come to you and bless you. 25 If you make me an altar of stone, you shall not build it of hewn stones, for if you wield your tool on it you profane it. 26 And you shall not go up by steps to my altar, that your nakedness be not exposed on it.’”

The internal structure of the prescription for worship features altars at the beginning and end and the name of the Lord in the middle:

- A Earthen altar (Exodus 20:24a)
 - X Name of the Lord (Exodus 20:24b)
- A' Stone altar (Exodus 20:25-26)

The Lord instructs the Israelites to make altars in the places where he has caused his name to be remembered, where he has come to them and blessed them. By coming to them and blessing them, he causes his name to be remembered. The Israelites are to build altars in such

places and to offer sacrifices to commemorate what the Lord has done and thereby they remember what he has done.

The Lord instructs them to do what the patriarchs did. When the Lord visited Abraham and made promises, he “built there an altar to the Lord, who had appeared to him” (Genesis 12:7). Abraham continued to build such altars (Genesis 12:8, 13:4, 22:9). Isaac and Jacob, Abraham’s son and grandson, respectively, did likewise (Genesis 26:25; 33:20; 35:1, 3, 7). Jacob also named the altars he built, calling one El-Elohe-Israel, which means “God, the God of Israel,” and the other El-Bethel, which means “God of Bethel.”

These encounters with God changed the course of each man’s life. Moreover, they changed the course of history. In awe, the patriarchs commemorated such encounters.

The building of altars, then, is part of Israel’s ancient history. It is also part of its recent history. When the Lord enabled Israel to defeat Amalek, Moses built an altar and called it “The Lord is My Banner” (Exodus 17:15). The Lord, then, is instructing the Israelites to continue the ancient tradition that Moses has recently revived.

Simple altars

The Lord instructs the Israelites to build these altars of earth or uncut stones. Later in Exodus, he will instruct them to build an altar for the tabernacle made of acacia wood and overlaid with bronze (Exodus 27:1-3). The altar for the moveable tabernacle, and later the fixed temple, will serve as the setting for regularly scheduled worship. The simple altars of earth or stone, on the other hand, will allow for quick assembly in immediate commemoration of the Lord’s appearances.

To cut stones by using a tool would be to profane this kind of altar, for reasons the narrator does not disclose (though scholars offer different theories).² Also, the use of steps is prohibited, lest the nakedness of those making the offerings be exposed. Again, the narrator does not inform us how the use of steps would expose nakedness or what’s objectionable about the exposure of skin (though again, scholars offer different theories).³

The burnt offering will later be prescribed in Leviticus 1. Everything of this animal went up in smoke as a sweet aroma to God. It signified complete surrender by the worshiper who brought the animal and

complete acceptance by God. The peace offering will be legislated in Leviticus 3 and 7. This was a communal meal offering to celebrate peace with God. It was usually for thanksgiving, for payment of vows, or as a freewill offering.

When I made a pilgrimage to the Holy Land, I was disappointed to find ornate churches commemorating—and covering over—supposed places of divine visitation instead of simple monuments. Instead of entering the exceedingly dark Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem, and waiting in a long line to see the spot where Jesus was supposedly born, I much preferred scanning the nearby hillside and imagining what it must have been like for certain shepherds who kept watch over their flock by night.

Build altars

You never know when God is going to show up, and you never know what he’s going to do when he shows up. As many times as he’s shown up in my life, sometimes in obvious ways, sometimes in subtle ways, he continues to surprise me with his appearances, with his timing, and with his ways.

Sometimes you recognize him right away. Other times you recognize him only in retrospect. Either way, it can be a helpful exercise to commemorate such encounters. That way, they become part of you. Who knows how the Spirit will access these encounters in the future? Call this reactive worship: you react to what God has done by commemorating it. There are different ways to commemorate such encounters (short of building an altar of earth or stone!).

Simply telling others about your encounters is a way of commemorating them. You can do so one on one or in a small group you’re a part of. We make time in our worship services regularly for what we call Life Together, when you can share with the whole church.

You can commemorate your encounters by writing about them. When you put words to your experience, you learn about the experience. Moreover, you have a record of it. You can return to what you’ve written and rediscover what you’ve learned.

Journal about your experience. Write a poem about it. When the Lord shows up in my life, I write a story about it and post it on a blog so that others can be encouraged.

Photographs can commemorate an encounter. Looking at a photo that is worth saving, you not only remember the moment, you also remember why the moment mattered, which helps you recenter on what matters. Photo books memorialize more than just a moment; they memorialize several days or a season. When you take photos, just make sure you're not so busy taking photos of the moment that you don't experience the moment.

We have a mission team that just returned from India. While they were away, I leafed through the photo books that Atul and Ayrin made of prior trips to India. As I did so, I remembered watching our medical people treat people who otherwise had no access to care. I remembered teaching pastors, some of whom traveled for days to be with us. I remembered preaching in churches to spiritually thirsty people.

I remembered: these trips are worth doing. I reconnected with what matters. And I'm inspired: I want to live in a way that's worthy of a photo book, even if no photos are taken.

A napkin

I used to meet weekly with a friend at a café in downtown Palo Alto. One time, we were both struggling, he with a never-ending remodel, me with a dying relationship. After about an hour, Don excused himself to go to the restroom. While he was away, I grabbed a cocktail napkin, scribbled on it, and placed it on the table.

When Don returned, this message was waiting for him: "It's gonna work! P.S. I don't know how it's gonna work. November 29, 1995." I felt sure that his chapter would have a good ending. I wasn't so sure about my chapter.

Later, I excused myself, which gave Don time to scribble a note of his own. When I returned, a cocktail napkin was waiting for me with the same message. He felt sure that my chapter would have a good ending.

It turns out the napkins were right: both our chapters had good endings. I probably would have forgotten about that meeting with Don if hadn't saved the napkin he gave me, which encourages me to this day. What am I struggling with today? It's gonna work.

An act of worship

When you build an altar of remembrance, the purpose is not to worship the experience or the place where it happened, or to try to feel that way again. The purpose of building an altar of remembrance is to reconnect you with God, who chooses when and where to show up.

C.S. Lewis again:

These things—the beauty, the memory of our own past—are good images of what we really desire; but if they are mistaken for the thing itself they turn into dumb idols, breaking the hearts of their worshippers. For they are not the thing itself; they are only the scent of a flower we have not found, the echo of a tune we have not heard, news from a country we have never yet visited.⁴

Building altars, so to speak, in response to a divine encounter, is an act of worship. The encounter forms you, but so does building an altar that commemorates it. David remembers as he writes, and as he does so, he worships: "I remember the days of old; / I meditate on all that you have done; / I ponder the work of your hands. / I stretch out my hands to you; / my soul thirsts for you like a parched land." (Psalm 143:5-6).

When God really showed up

One day, God really showed up. I mean, he really showed up. I mean, he showed up in the flesh. How do we commemorate that? Very simply. With a cross.

When you enter our worship center, if you look up, you see a cross. When you leave, if you look up, you see what it means: "You are not your own, for you were bought with a price" (1 Corinthians 6:20).

After the prologue comes the main body of the Book of the Covenant, the forty-two ordinances, in Exodus 21:1-23:12.

What God cares about

The primary function of the law of God is to reveal God. It's his law; therefore, it tells us about him. It tells us what he cares about. Even a cursory look and the forty-two ordinances leaves one with the impression that God cares about people. What is striking about the Book of the Covenant is the value it places on human life, especially in comparison to other ancient codes.

This can be seen in the book's disposition toward the death penalty. The codes of other Near Eastern peoples exalted property values, imposing the death penalty for theft. The Book of the Covenant, on the other hand, never imposes the death penalty for the violation of property rights. Paramount instead is the sacredness of human life.

The Code of Hammurabi demonstrates almost no concern for the poor and disadvantaged; instead, the code is designed to protect the upper class. The Book of the Covenant, on the other hand, values all people and places great emphasis on the poor, the disadvantaged, the indentured servant, and the alien.

The Book of the Covenant forbids charging interest on a loan, and it forbids holding onto a cloak that has been taken in a pledge. Borrowers were part of the lower class. Uniquely, the borrower is given precedence over the lender, who occupied the upper strata of society.

In the Ancient Near East, slaves were treated solely as property. A slave would be branded. Injury to a slave simply required that the owner be recompensed. A slave could be given as a pledge on a loan, and he or she could be sold or exchanged.

The Book of the Covenant, on the other hand, has no provision at all for slavery but assumes the presence of indentured servants, and it protects their rights. Even within the Ten Words, indentured servants were given rights: they too are to partake in the sabbath rest. A man who injures a servant is to be punished. Servants are allowed to go free if their masters strike them so as to destroy eyes or knock out teeth.

From these examples it is clear that the Lord cares about human life—all human life. He has created each person in his image; therefore, each is supremely valuable.

A contemplative order

Brian Morgan, a pastor at Peninsula Bible Church Cupertino, comments of the Book of the Covenant:

The beauty of the Book of the Covenant lies not only in the ideals it affirms but also in the methods it uses to implement those ideals in a less than perfect world. As God steps into the culture of the Ancient Near East, we find him not only setting forth holy concerns for his people but also, through his “judgments” and “ordinances,” sowing seeds of change that will sprout with

counter-cultural roots and grow against the prevailing winds of the culture, until hopefully some day the ideals are reached. Even as these seeds begin to take root, we find his guidelines changing with the new situation. God is keenly aware of where people are and the cultures they live in. With great skill he knows how to take people from where they are to where they need to be to fully reflect his character. We on the other hand are often so impatient and black and white in our approaches that we insist on having all or nothing—and when you insist on all or nothing, you always end up with nothing.⁵

As we worship the Lord, as we draw close to him in adoration, we find that his concerns become our concerns. We begin to think as he thinks. Just as when we adopt the attitude of someone we spend a lot of time with, we begin to adopt the attitude of the Lord, assuming that we're spending time with him in loving adoration. As we worship him, we share his values—we share his love for people.

“We are a contemplative order,” Mother Teresa told a visitor who could not comprehend her commitment to the downtrodden of Calcutta. “First we meditate on Jesus, and then we go out and look for him in disguise.” We draw close to Jesus in worship, his concerns become our concerns, and we move out in love, looking for “him” everywhere.

The Book of the Covenant closes with the epilogue, which, like the prologue, prohibits idolatry and prescribes worship.

Three feasts

Exodus 23:13-19:

“Pay attention to all that I have said to you, and make no mention of the names of other gods, nor let it be heard on your lips.

14 “Three times in the year you shall keep a feast to me. 15 You shall keep the Feast of Unleavened Bread. As I commanded you, you shall eat unleavened bread for seven days at the appointed time in the month of Abib, for in it you came out of Egypt. None shall appear before me empty-handed. 16 You shall keep the Feast of Harvest, of the firstfruits of your labor, of what you sow in the field. You shall keep the Feast of Ingathering at the end of the year, when you gather in from the field the fruit of your labor. 17 Three times in the year shall all your males appear before the LORD God.

18 “You shall not offer the blood of my sacrifice with anything leavened, or let the fat of my feast remain until the morning.

19 “The best of the firstfruits of your ground you shall bring into the house of the Lord your God.

“You shall not boil a young goat in its mother’s milk.

Like the prescription for worship in the prologue, the prescription for worship in the epilogue has an internal, though different, structure. The first half commands three feasts per year, and the second half details the feasts:

- A Three times a year (Exodus 23:14)
 - B Feast of Unleavened Bread (Exodus 23:15)
 - C Feast of Harvest (Exodus 23:16a)
 - D Feast of Ingathering (Exodus 23:16b)
- A’ Three times a year (Exodus 23:17)
 - B’ Feast of Unleavened Bread (Exodus 23:18)
 - C’ Feast of Harvest (Exodus 23:19a)
 - D’ Feast of Ingathering (Exodus 23:19b)

Each feast is uniquely related to the agricultural cycle of the land: the Feast of Unleavened Bread, the beginning of the barley harvest; the Feast of Harvest, during the wheat harvest; the Feast of Ingathering, at the end of the vine and orchard harvest.

In contrast to the worship prescribed in the prologue, which is to take place any time the Lord came to the Israelites and blessed them, the worship prescribed in the epilogue is to take place rhythmically, three times a year. The altars commemorate special appearances by the Lord; the festivals commemorate his regular provision of food, which is not to be taken for granted.

Each feast commemorated not only the Lord’s provision in harvest but also other aspects of his provision. The narrator here connects the Feast of Unleavened Bread, later called Pentecost, with the Lord’s liberation of the nation from Egypt. The Feast of Harvest came to be a celebration of the Lord’s giving of the law. The Feast of Ingathering came to be called the Feast of Tabernacles, or the Feast of Booths, and celebrated the Lord’s care for Israel on its journey from Egypt to Canaan (Leviticus 23:34, 42-43).

Your best stuff

The Feast of Unleavened Bread was to involve sacrifices without leaven, which would remind the Israelites of the exodus (Exodus 12). This feast came right after the Feast of Passover, and they were often seen as one feast. This would explain the reference to “the fat of my feast” in connection with the Feast of Unleavened Bread. The fat was the special portion of the Passover lamb. It was not to be left until morning, in which case it would become rancid.

The “choice first fruits,” which constitute the best produce, are to be offered during the Feast of the Harvest.

Because there is such a clear parallel between the first two feasts and the prescribed sacrifices in 23:18-19a, the last prescribed sacrifice, in 23:19b, is to be connected with the Feast of Ingathering. But what are we to make of the command, “You shall not boil a young goat in its mother’s milk”? One way to translate this command would be: “You are not to boil a young goat while it is still nursing.” If this is the case, this is simply a command to offer only weaned animals, not babies.

What do all these feast details have in common? They all call for people to offer up their best stuff to the Lord: the best part of the lamb, the first fruits, and mature animals. The Israelites are to echo Abel, not Cain (Genesis 4:1-7).

Each feast, in which the people give back to the Lord in remembrance of his provision for them, are festivals of thanksgiving. The people give their best stuff to give thanks to the Lord for what he has done in all aspects of his provision for them.

Give your best stuff to the Lord. Give the best of your life to the Lord. In fact, give your whole life to the Lord (Romans 12:1-2).

Find a rhythm

The new covenant does not prescribe feasts for us, but that doesn’t mean it does away with rhythms. We’re rhythmic creatures who live in a rhythmic world. We experience daytime and nighttime, days and weeks and months and seasons and years.

If building altars is reactive, worshiping in rhythm is proactive. When you build an altar, you react to what God has done. When you worship in rhythm, you proactively seek him.

Building altars and worshiping rhythmically are mutually reinforcing. Building altars propels you into your rhythm, where you can bring what you have experienced to the community, and your rhythm propels you out with what you have experienced in the community in a way that makes you more watchful for divine appearances.

David had powerful encounters with God outside of his normal rhythm, even in a cave. He commemorated those encounters by writing psalms (Psalms 57, 142). However, he could also write this: “I was glad when they said to me, / “Let us go to the house of the Lord!” (Psalm 122:1). The sons of Korah wrote this:

These things I remember,
as I pour out my soul:
how I would go with the throng
and lead them in procession to the house of God
with glad shouts and songs of praise,
a multitude keeping festival. (Psalm 42:4)

As a church, we have a certain rhythm: weekly worship services, Advent and Christmas, Lent and Good Friday and Easter, the men’s retreat, the women’s retreat, Camp PBC, the Fall Retreat. Some events, especially Camp PBC by Mount Shasta, feel like a pilgrimage.

You could even say that traveling to worship on a Sunday is a pilgrimage of sorts. People have been making such weekly pilgrimages to our church for seventy-five years now. In September, we’re going to spend a Sunday commemorating God’s goodness to us.

Between Christmas Day and New Year’s Day, there were a few periods of time when I was the only one on campus. During one of those periods, I walked over to the worship center and spent about an hour walking around and praying. I felt those seventy-five years. I felt the people who have come here to worship for three quarters of a century. And I worshiped.

Find your rhythm, including regular times alone with the Lord and regular times with other believers, both in large settings and small settings.

I include in my rhythm two annual personal retreats, one in the winter in Point Reyes and the other in the summer in Big Sur. Each is a sort of pilgrimage. You’ve probably heard me talk too much about these, but if you have, it’s because they’ve proved invaluable to me.

One advantage to worshiping rhythmically is that you always have something to look forward to, assuming there’s something in your rhythm that you enjoy. I’ll be heading up to Point Reyes in two weeks, and I can already taste the Lord.

I go on two three-day fishing trips a year with my brothers, one in the spring and one in the fall. Being on a trout stream, out in creation, is a worshipful experience for me, even if I don’t catch anything. (But my brothers and I always catch something!).

Ruth Haley Barton writes: “The kingdom of God is here now, if we are willing to arrange our life to embrace it. Paul speaks in passionate terms of using every ounce of his energy and intentionality to present every person mature in Christ—beginning, presumably, with himself. The only question, it seems, is, How bad do you want it?”⁶

Good question: How bad do you want the kingdom of God? Don’t want it bad enough? Here’s another question: Do you *want to want* it bad enough? If so, arrange your life to embrace the kingdom of God. Start by finding a rhythm.

Jesus transforms the feasts

If the instruction to build altars sends us back to the book of Genesis, the instruction to celebrate feasts launches us forward to the gospel of John. Jesus transformed the feasts in a way that made himself the center of them (John 2:13-23, John 5, John 7:1-39, John 10:22-39, John 13:1-17:26). The feasts, then, were just waiting for Jesus to invest them with himself.

The Feast of Ingathering, also called the Feast of Booths, commemorated God’s provision for his people in the wilderness. As part of the celebration, the high priest would lead a procession to the Pool of Siloam in Jerusalem. There he filled a golden pitcher, carried it to the temple, and poured it over the altar. The ceremony served to remind the people that God miraculously gave them water in the wilderness.

John tells us what Jesus did during the Feast of Booths:

On the last day of the feast, the great day, Jesus stood up and cried out, “If anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink. 38 Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, ‘Out of his heart will flow rivers of living water.’” 39 Now this he said about the Spirit, whom those who believed in him were to receive, for as yet the Spirit had

not been given, because Jesus was not yet glorified(John 7:37-39).

Come to Jesus

What do we do with desire? Come to Jesus. Come to Jesus because he can create rivers of living water in your heart. Come to Jesus because some place in your heart, you know you need to. Come to Jesus because when you think about it, where else are you going to go? You can do it. You can't make rivers of living water flow, but you can come to Jesus.

How do you come to Jesus? Any way you can! Our text today suggests two ways in particular. Build altars and find a rhythm.

Your assignment is to spend ten minutes alone sometime this week, feel whatever you feel, and use your imagination to come to Jesus.

Again, listen to David: "I stretch out my hands to you; / my soul thirsts for you like a parched land."

Endnotes

1. C.S. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy* (San Diego, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1955), 16.
2. Scholar Bruce Waltke says, "They were shown to be the Lord's altars by being made of fieldstones, as they came from the hand of the creator, not from the hand of a stone mason." [Bruce Waltke, *An Old Testament Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2007), 434.]
3. John H. Sailhamer says, "The ultimate purpose of any such ritual is the covering of human nakedness that stems from the fall (Genesis 3:7). The implication is that all ritual is only a reflection of that first gracious act of God in covering human nakedness with garments of skin (Genesis 3:21). Later the provision was made for priests to wear linen undergarments to cover their naked flesh when they approached the altar" (Exodus 28:42). [John H. Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1992), 289.]
4. C.S. Lewis, *The Weight of Glory and Other Addresses* (New York: Touchstone, 1996), 29.
5. Brian Morgan, "Whose Slave Are You?" (Peninsula Bible Church Cupertino, Oct. 8, 2006, <https://pbcc.org/sermons/whos-slave-are-you/>.)
6. Ruth Haley Barton, *Sacred Rhythms: Arranging Our Lives for Spiritual Transformation* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006), 147.

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