

SOME HEALTHY MOTIVATION

SERIES: EXODUS: JOURNEY TO FREEDOM



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Exodus 23:20-33
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How often do you hear something on the news—whether from Twitter or Facebook, in your email inbox, or even from an actual newspaper(!)—that caused you to change your plans for the day? Even in a small way? Neil Postman poses this question in his book *Amusing Ourselves to Death*. Writing in 1985, he asks:

*How often does it occur that information provided you on morning radio or television, or in the morning newspaper, causes you to alter your plans for the day, or take some action that you would not otherwise have taken, or provides insight into some problem you are required to solve?*¹

The implied answer here is: *seldom to never*. Most of the time, the information we take in through the news has little impact on how we actually live our lives. Right?

Postman poses this question in writing about how technologies that give us greater access to information have the unintended consequence of lowering what he calls the “information-action ratio.” His observation is this: the more information we have, the less likely we are actually to do anything based on that information.²

Does anyone know (or want to guess) what technology Neil Postman had in mind when he wrote this? *The telegraph*. That's right. Not the Internet. Not the smartphone. Not Twitter. But the telegraph. Before the telegraph, he argues, the only access to the news we had in real time was about things that were happening in your immediate community: a house that burned down in your neighborhood or a shooting that occurred in your community or a law that was passed in your city. These were things that you might actually be able to do something about. Now, I can pick up my phone, and without even unlocking it, I can get real-time information about an earthquake in Turkey or a shooting in Memphis or any number of other things. The problem is that it is difficult to take many actions on this information.

Why do I bring this up? Why am I starting here today? Because you are about to hear a sermon. And this sermon will contain, among other things, some information. However, the high-information diet that we all have just by way of living in 2023 has left us with a low information-action ratio. Because of the sheer volume of information we take in, we have been conditioned to be very slow to take action on that information. That is true for the news, but that is also true for a sermon.

This morning, we are resuming our study of Exodus. Over the last two weeks, we have looked at the giving of the Mosaic law. Moses and the people of Israel are gathered at Mt. Sinai. God calls Moses up to the top of the mountain to give him, first, the Ten Commandments and then what is referred to as the Book of the Covenant—additional instructions about how to worship and how to live in relationship to one another. God has just shared a lot of information with the people.

God knows that even with a low information diet like the Israelites certainly had, information alone will not be enough to empower the people to respond in obedience. So here, in Exodus 23, God is also going to give some *motivation* for obedience. He has already given them the information. Now he will give them the motivation to follow him—to actually do what he said. I believe he wants to do the same thing for us here today.

If you have come here today looking for some information about God or what it looks like to follow him, I am going to give you some of that. But my hope for this morning is not that you will walk away with more information. My hope and prayer for this morning are that you will walk away with some motivation and that motivation might help move you to a place of transformation.

Oh Lord, we need you. We need you to help us understand your word. We need you to help us obey your word. We need you in ways that we aren't even aware of yet. Be with us, Oh Lord. Help us this morning, we pray.

The promise

Exodus 23:20-22:

“Behold, I send an angel before you to guard you on the way and to bring you to the place that I have prepared. 21 Pay careful attention to him and obey his voice; do not rebel against him, for he will not pardon your transgression, for my name is in him. 22 “But if you carefully obey his voice and do all that I say, then I will be an enemy to your enemies and an adversary to your adversaries.

Here, after God has given the people the Ten Commandments and the instructions in the Book of the Covenant, he wants to remind them of the bigger picture of what he is doing. God has not brought the people out of Egypt to leave them in the wilderness. Rather, he has brought them out of Egypt because of a promise that goes back to Abraham—the promise that he will bring them into a new land of peace and prosperity.

As God gives them the law—as he teaches them how to live well in relation to him and one another—he reminds them of where they are headed.

We also need to be reminded of where we are headed. I want to plant that seed now, and we will come back to that later. First, let's talk about this angel.

With the promise of the land, God says that he will send an angel before them to guard them and bring them into the land. This angel appears in a few places throughout Exodus, and it always seems to be a manifestation of God himself. That is what's going on here. Look at what is said of the angel: the people must pay attention to him and obey him. This angel has the ability to protect the people. Most strikingly, he has the power to forgive (or not forgive) sins, and God's name is in him. Through this angelic figure, God himself is promising to guard the people and bring them into the land.

Now, he gets to the motivation part. How is it that God wants to motivate his people to remain faithful to him and obey his commands? How is it that he wants to motivate us to follow him and obey him? We will see that he uses the carrot and the stick, or, in this case, the stick and then the carrot.

The stick

Let's reread the first few verses:

Exodus 23:20-22:

“Behold, I send an angel before you to guard you on the way and to bring you to the place that I have prepared. 21 Pay careful attention to him and obey his voice; do not rebel against him, for he will not pardon your transgression, for my name is in him. 22 “But if you carefully obey his voice and do all that I say, then I will be an enemy to your enemies and an adversary to your adversaries.

Do you see both the carrot and the stick there? Let's think about both of these elements, which are meant to motivate us toward obedience. First, the stick comes in verse 21: If you rebel against me, I will not pardon your transgressions.

This language makes people gravitate away from the God of the Old Testament and toward Jesus, who tells us to love our enemies and who healed people's bodies and forgave their sins. But in Exodus, God says he won't forgive those who rebel against him.

Let's think about how this actually plays out. Do the people end up rebelling against God? Yes! Does God forgive them? Yes. Over and over again. Then why does he say that he won't forgive them? Because God is trying to give *motivation* rather than mere *information*.

I have three kids. They are wonderful. But they are also little sinners. And sometimes, every once in a while, they do something they aren't supposed to do. Now, part of my role as a parent is to let them know that sins have consequences. Poor choices have consequences. Disobedience has consequences. Now, some of those consequences are natural, and some are artificial consequences that I impose on them. If you put your hand on the stove, you will get burned. That's a natural consequence. If you hit your brother, he will probably hit you back. That is another kind of natural consequence. If you hit me, I am not going to hit you back. But I will impose an artificial consequence—a time-out, a lost privilege, something like that—to help you learn that we don't solve problems with violence, that you need to respect your authorities, that you need to love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you. I impose this consequence because, one day, if you continue to hit people when they do something you don't like, you will go to jail. Or, at the very least, you won't have any friends.

I need my kids to know that, in the long run, hitting people is not going to give them what they are looking for, so I impose consequences on them to help them learn that. And I make sure those consequences are clear on the front end.

If I want to motivate my kids to listen to my instructions, how helpful will it be if I say, “Don't hit your brother. But if you do, don't worry. I'll just forgive you, and we will move on.” That is not going to be very motivating.

So one of the ways that God motivates us to obedience is by warning us that there are real consequences for sin. Some of them might be natural consequences. Some might be consequences that God imposes on us for our own good. God wants you to know that there are real consequences for sin.

That is not cruel of God. That doesn't make him mean, angry, or vindictive. Rather, it demonstrates that he is a loving parent.

In our relationship with God, it is appropriate, to a degree, to allow the warning of consequences to motivate us to obedience.

The carrot

This way is not the primary way that God motivates us. If your primary reason for following God is that you don't want to go to hell or suffer whatever other natural consequences might come from your sin, that will not get you very far. That motivation will never lead to transformation.

But God does not only motivate us with the stick. He also motivates with the carrot—by explaining the rewards for obedience. This really is what God wants to drive us. We see this in this text in that God gives one sentence about the stick, but he gives ten verses about the carrot. He wants us to know and understand, and be motivated by all the amazing gifts that are ours if we choose to listen to him.

Let's look at what God says in verses 23-25.

Exodus 23:35-25a:

“When my angel goes before you and brings you to the Amorites and the Hittites and the Perizzites and the Canaanites, the Hivites and the Jebusites, and I blot them out, 24 you

shall not bow down to their gods nor serve them, nor do as they do, but you shall utterly overthrow them and break their pillars in pieces. 25 You shall serve the Lord your God.

Here God reiterates the promise and blessing that come with obedience: I will go before you, and I will fight for you. But in the midst of the promise, there is still instruction. There is still an expectation of obedience. Here, especially, the expectation is that the people will obliterate the idols of their enemies. Tear them down. Break them into pieces. Do not worship them.

These are just the first two of the Ten Commandments. Don't have any other gods before me, and don't worship any idols. Worship me, serve me, and love me more than you love anything else. This is the gateway into the good life. This is what I have created you for.

God continues, picking up in verse 25. As we read this, listen to all the things God says he will do for the people.

Exodus 23:25-31:

You shall serve the Lord your God, and he will bless your bread and your water, and I will take sickness away from among you. 26 None shall miscarry or be barren in your land; I will fulfill the number of your days. 27 I will send my terror before you and will throw into confusion all the people against whom you shall come, and I will make all your enemies turn their backs to you. 28 And I will send hornets before you, which shall drive out the Hivites, the Canaanites, and the Hittites from before you. 29 I will not drive them out from before you in one year, lest the land become desolate and the wild beasts multiply against you. 30 Little by little I will drive them out from before you, until you have increased and possess the land. 31 And I will set your border from the Red Sea to the Sea of the Philistines, and from the wilderness to the Euphrates, for I will give the inhabitants of the land into your hand.

These are remarkable promises from the Lord. Two main things come through in these promises. First, we have a description of the land, and the description here is breathtaking. This is Eden language. This is paradise language. This is new heavens and new earth language. I will bless your food and your drink. I will restore your health. I will multiply you. This land will be a land of

abundance. Of health. Of blessing. Of life. This land will be an experience of life lived the way God intended it to be lived. This land will be heaven on earth.

One element of God's blessing is the richness of the land that will be theirs. The other element of God's blessing is how they will get the land: namely, God will give it to them. Did you notice everything that God said he would do? He said:

I will blot out your enemies. I will take sickness away from you. I will fulfill the number of your days. I will send my terror before you. I will throw your enemies into confusion. I will make them turn and run from you. I will send hornets before you. I will drive them out from before you. I will set your border. I will give the inhabitants into your hand.

God gives them a description of the richness of the land, and he gives them a promise that he will fight for them along the way.

When Dallas Willard writes about what is necessary for change in the life of a believer, he boils it down to three key ingredients: vision, intention, and means.³

Vision is a mental image of what life will look like on the other side of the change.

Intention is saying, "I will do this. I will commit to change."

Means is the method or practices we implement to bring about change.

Think about a young violin player. We talked about this at Young Adult Fellowship this past week because one of our people was putting on a violin concert last night. When a violin player starts out, that violin makes some awful noises for years. If that young player, and the parents of that young player, are going to stick with the violin through those first few years, they need a vision of what that violin can sound like. So they listen to Bach and Beethoven, and Mozart. Wow, this is a beautiful instrument. That's the vision.

Intention: I want to become the kind of person who can play the violin like that. I intend to do that.

Means: I will practice for 30 minutes a day. I will take lessons. I will practice my scales. These are the actions that I will take.

Before we get to the means and ever have an opportunity to express intention, we have to have a vision of what life in the kingdom of God looks like. In other words, we must be clear in our minds about what we will experience if we choose to live life in God's way instead of our way. That's what life in the kingdom is about. Life in the kingdom of God is about what happens when we live life according to God's rules instead of our rules.

And here, God is giving his people a vision of what life will look like if they live according to God's rules instead of their own. If they choose to obey him rather than rebel against him.

He says I will be on your side. I will fight your battles for you. You will get to sit back and watch me work. I will be on your side.

And I will lead you into a life of abundance. Of blessing. Of prosperity. Of peace. This is what I want for you. This is what will be yours if you live in my kingdom if you live life the way I designed it.

We need a vision of life in the kingdom of God.

So often, we default into thinking that God gives us rules to keep something good from us rather than leading us into what is actually good. Take, for example, Jesus's instructions to store up treasure in heaven rather than on earth (Matthew 6:19-21). We might hear this as God keeping some of the good things of this life from us. But is that what he is really doing? No! Because he knows that moth and rust will ultimately destroy the things of this world.

Last weekend, my wife Linzy and I sat down to watch something on Netflix. We turned the TV on to find evidence that some unnamed projectile had been launched into the TV by some unnamed family member, leaving the TV unusable: moth and rust, and children.

In 2022, the S&P 500 was down nearly 20%: moth and rust. In the last few months, some of us have gotten laid off, many of us have friends, family, and coworkers that have been laid off, and most of us are living with a greater sense of economic uncertainty than we are comfortable with. Moth and rust.

Jesus tells us to store up treasures in heaven because he knows that earthly treasure is always fading, so seeking to accumulate it will always lead to disappointment eventually.

In contrast, Jesus says to invest in things that last for eternity. Invest in people. In relationships with God and with each other. Work for justice. Share the gospel. Invest in eternity, and you will find true abundance. This is what life in the kingdom is really about.

Life in the kingdom of God is a life of abundance. Jesus is leading us into this, and this vision is meant to motivate us to faithfulness and obedience.

I am going to prepare a place for you

This passage began with a promise that God would bring the people to the place he had prepared for them. On the night before Jesus was crucified, he gathered his disciples into the Upper Room to share the Passover with them. While they were there, he said these words to them:

John 14:1-3:

Let not your hearts be troubled. Believe in God; believe also in me. 2 In my Father's house are many rooms. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? 3 And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also.

Right now, Jesus is preparing a place for us—an eternal home. Just as God promised to bring the people into the Promised Land, Jesus says that he will come back and take us to this place that he is preparing. Notice what he says about this place. He doesn't highlight that this will be a place of peace and prosperity, though it certainly will. He doesn't highlight that this will be a place with no more evil or sickness or death, though it will. Rather, he says, "I will take you to myself, that where I am you may also be."

The thing that makes heaven so great is not primarily that there will be no sin or sadness or sickness or death. The thing that makes heaven so great is that Jesus will be there! And we will be with him. Face to face. Fully present. Fully together. Fully alive in his presence.

But Jesus is also here. We get to be with Jesus here. We get to know him here.

It is the opportunity to know and be known by Jesus—to be with him in this world that he has created—that is meant to be the strongest and most compelling

motivation for listening to God. It is not about following a certain set of rules. It is about being in relationship with the one who loves us more than we could ever imagine.

Co-laborers with God

God does not expect us just to sit back and be passive observers of the great things that he is doing. Rather, he invites us to play a part as well.

Exodus 23:31-33:

And I will set your border from the Red Sea to the Sea of the Philistines, and from the wilderness to the Euphrates, for I will give the inhabitants of the land into your hand, and you shall drive them out before you. 32 You shall make no covenant with them and their gods. 33 They shall not dwell in your land, lest they make you sin against me; for if you serve their gods, it will surely be a snare to you.

God fights for us, but he also asks us to participate with him. He does not set himself up as our rich benefactor who gives us everything we need so we can sit back and do nothing. No! Rather, he positions us as co-laborer with him, together working to bring the kingdom of heaven to earth.

Why does he do this? Why does God invite us to work with him instead of just doing all the work for us? Because working with him is the context in which we develop a relationship with him.

One of the best ways to get to know someone is to serve alongside them. Whether that be soldiers who go to battle together or high school ministry volunteers who lead a small group together, serving together brings people close. God gives us the opportunity to work with him in bringing the kingdom of heaven to earth. In the process, we are building a relationship with him and getting to know him better. And, over time, becoming more like him.

God does not give us a set of instructions and sends us out on our own to do them. Instead, he gives us a window into how he has designed life to work and invites us to join him in the work he is doing in the world. Let's join him in his work so we can experience abundant life with him.

Endnotes

1. Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business*, 20th Anniversary Edition (New York, NY: Penguin Book, 2005), 68.
2. Postman, 68.
3. Dallas Willard, *Renovation of the Heart* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2002)