

## **Part Two**

### **The Bible and the Rules of Relationship**

## **Chapter 6**

### **Designed for Stability**

In the first chapter we made note of the fact that the Bible comes across as a history, the exciting history of a people and their God. It is the history of a God who truly cares trying to bring His people into a meaningful relationship with Himself. Some scholars call it salvation history.

But a second thing that stands out to anybody who reads the text for the first time is that there is an awful lot of law in the Bible. It contains an awful lot of rules and regulations. Not very exciting to most people. Most people would prefer that those rules and regulations were not there. So what is the purpose of the laws of the Bible? Why have rules and regulations if people don't like them?

#### **The Importance of Legal Language**

*From What God Is Like*

One reason the Bible is full of law is because God is a God of law and order. How do I know that? For starters, from what I see in the natural world. The natural world teaches us

something about the Person who designed the universe. And in practical terms the universe behaves in some very consistent ways. For example, if I hold a pencil in my hand and let go, what happens? The last ten times I did that it fell to the ground. The pencil never goes up and it never floats in the air. Maybe it's different where you live, but in my experience the law of gravity is still in effect. It tells me that whomever designed this universe is extremely concerned that things will function in a reasonably predictable fashion.

In practical terms, then, the universe is dependable. When you get up in the morning, your shoes are not on the ceiling. I don't know about you, but it would really mess up my mind if I woke up and my shoes were on the ceiling. I depend on finding them where I left them (which isn't always where my wife wants me to leave them). I count on the consistency and dependability of the universe I am living in.

Let me give you another example. How is it possible for me to walk across a room? Every time I take a step I am pushing off the floor and that requires friction. Now if you have ever been on an icy lake at just the right temperature you know that without friction you don't get very far and you may even hurt yourself. I depend on friction to get through a day, even when I don't think about it (and I rarely do). When I swing my legs off the bed and onto the floor I am counting on a little friction to get me going! Without it, I'm not going anywhere.

Often things get more complex than that. Aviators, for example, play one law against another in order to fly. If you play it right the law of lift can, in a sense, suspend the law of gravity and move a large airplane full of people through the air. But we count on the law of lift just as much as we count on the law of gravity. If one day there was no lift in the atmosphere

there would be a whole lot of surprises at the airport. But fortunately that too doesn't happen. When an airplane crashes, it is rarely because the laws of the universe are inconsistent, the plane went down because a mistake was made in the mechanics of the plane or the human element was involved. In practical terms, the laws of the universe are consistent and dependable. And if God designed this universe then it must be that He is a God of law and order.

### *From What We Are Like*

I believe there is a second reason God filled the Bible with legal language. Human beings themselves are beings of law and order, much though we grumble and complain about rules. We are different from the animals. For example, no animal ever told a lie. If a dog doesn't like you, it doesn't grin. If a dog doesn't like you, you have plenty of warning. And if a dog does like you get ready for some slobber, because there is no way a dog can hold back and hide its feelings of affection.

Dogs don't particularly operate by conscience either. Have you ever met a dog that felt bad about stealing a piece of meat and decided to return it? We are distinct from animals in our sense of right and wrong. The fact that most human beings have a conscience tells us that there is something very legal about the way we are made. We have a built in need for justice. Have you ever played or watched a pickup game of basketball? Do you know what a "do over" is? It's an attempt at fairness. Somebody calls a foul or somebody calls "traveling" (or "steps"), then an argument starts, and finally everyone decides on a "do over." A "do over" says "let's

act as if this never happened and run the play again.”

Why do people argue about calls in basketball? Because of a basic human need for fairness. I remember once I took down a rebound in basketball and started heading up the court, it looked like a good opportunity for a fast break. An opponent came over and called a foul. My stomach had contacted his elbow. I was incensed. How could my stomach foul his elbow? It made no sense to me at all. And I really got on his case about it. I thought it was a ridiculous call. It wasn't fair.

Why do people argue with their spouses? If your spouse is always right, there is no reason to argue. But when you argue, you are questioning the justice of a particular statement or action. So every time we have an argument with our spouse, we are confessing our belief that justice, law, and fairness are built-in aspects of our beings. We feel the need to live in a universe that is stable, consistent and based on law.

Self justification says, “I didn't do that, what are you blaming me for? It's not my fault!” Why even bother to defend ourselves if law doesn't matter? Frankly, we have a built-in need to be right. We need to be right with our friends. We need to be right with our families. Deep down inside this is very critical to us. It's no wonder that many people are afraid of the final judgement. It is devastating to consider the possibility that somehow everything that we have ever done, and everything that we are is all wrong. God's final judgment will put the final touch on everything. To have absolutely no confidence in the face of that judgment would be a miserable thing.

## **The Key to Stable Relationships**

If we recognize that law and order is natural to us and to the universe, that still leaves the question, Why? Why is it so natural? Why is law and order so important for us? What advantages do we receive for obeying the laws of nature and society? For one thing, law places boundaries around people's behaviors. There are things which are acceptable within a group of people and things which are not. These boundaries provide security. If you are in a high-crime area you trust that the locks are strong. At its best law functions like that. It protects us from ourselves, from our own instability. Without boundaries of some kind, freedom can be a very destructive thing.

Laws also reveal something about the character of the law makers. Good laws benefit everyone, while bad laws benefit no one, or benefit one group at the expense of another. In the words of the American Declaration of Independence, good laws enhance "the pursuit of happiness." Good laws provide a stable environment for growth and development.

### *Covenants and Relationship*

Above all else law needs to be understood in the context of "relationship." In the absence of relationship "law" tends to become faceless, mindless, cold-hearted, and abusive. In the context of relationship the right kind of law becomes a boundary within which tremendous freedom can be experienced. The Old Testament calls the laws of relationship "covenants." The concept of covenant closely resembles the English word "contract." In a "covenant" two parties enter into a relationship of some kind; to build a house, to get married, to go to school. All these things involve a relationship between people or between a person

and an institution. The contract defines those relationships and provides security and boundaries for those relationships.

The very term "Old Testament", in fact, has its roots in the Greek term, *diatheke*, or covenant. Early Greek readers of the Old Testament perceived that it was grounded in the concept of covenant or contract, and, therefore, it was grounded in the concept of relationship. Earlier in this book we talked about the importance of telling and retelling what God has done. Psalm 105:5-10 is one of those rehearsals of what God has done. But there is an interesting twist that makes it a little different than the passages we looked at in the previous section on history.

*Remember the wonders he has done,  
his miracles, and the judgments he pronounced,  
O descendants of Abraham his servant,  
O sons of Jacob, his chosen ones.  
He is the LORD our God;  
his judgments are in all the earth.  
He remembers his covenant forever,  
the word he commanded, for a thousand generations,  
the covenant he made with Abraham,  
the oath he swore to Isaac.  
He confirmed it to Jacob as a decree,  
to Israel as an everlasting covenant.  
Psalm 105: 5-10*

Like the recitals of history, this passage begins with a reference to the marvelous acts of God. It moves immediately, however, to such concepts as judgment, covenant and oath. The mighty actions of God are grounded in law and covenant. God swore an oath to the pioneers of ancient Israel and said, "Here is how I'm going to treat you as a people."

That's the amazing thing in this passage. God's side of the relationship is just as regulated by covenant as the human side. In other words, the great God of the universe, the

King, the Creator, who by definition could do anything He wanted, chooses to confine Himself by rules and regulations! He does this because He wants to be in relationship with human beings. He wants us to feel as secure in the relationship as He does. So before God ever asked anyone to submit to rules, He submitted Himself to those same rules. These rules of relationship governed His actions in history, and it's because of that history that He asked His people to obey the covenant as well. His action is the ground for our reaction. So the covenant provides the basis for God's action, and God's action provides the basis for our reaction.

#### COVENANT ----> HISTORY ----> COVENANT

Now we get to the rules part. Any covenant stipulates rules that are binding on both parties. Sometimes young people don't like rules and regulations because they see them as arbitrary, someone else's attempt to control them from the outside. This happens, parents, when you establish rules for your kids that you yourself don't abide by. But the Bible tells us that God's rules flow right out of His own consistent action.

Let's see how this works in a fabulous law passage, Deut 30:16-19: *"For I command you today to love the LORD your God, to walk in his ways, and to keep his commands, decrees, and laws; then you will live and increase, and the LORD your God will bless you in the land you are entering to possess. But if your heart turns away and you are not obedient, and if you are drawn away to bow down to other gods and worship them, I declare to you this day that you will certainly be destroyed. You will not live long in the land you are crossing the Jordan to enter and possess. This day I call heaven and earth as witnesses against you that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Now choose life, so that you and your children may live."*

Law provides boundaries within which there is freedom. Deut 30 provides both the freedom and the boundaries. There is a choice and it's a life and death choice. God's choice for Israel was life. He wanted them to "choose life." He wants people to live. The rules and regulations are not simply floating out into space, their purpose is to enhance life. There are consequences to our actions. Obey and live, disobey and die.

This message about "blessings" and "curses" is not that far from where we live today. A few years back the bridge collapsed in my home town. It was a terrible thing for the community because it turned the downtown business section into a dead-end street. And that pretty much destroyed the downtown economically. The merchants no longer had customers. The situation was so desperate that when a contract was made for a new bridge, the community leaders said, "You must put a date in that contract."

The date was set for May 26, about nine months later. And that was a challenge for the builders. So the community leaders put "blessings and curses" in the contract. For every day that the bridge was finished ahead of schedule, \$10,000 extra dollars would be placed in the builders' pockets. And for every day that completion was late, \$10,000 would be deducted from their final payment. You know what? They finished the bridge twenty-six days early!

This is what Deuteronomy means by blessings and curses. A blessing is the reward you get when you fulfill your side of a contract. A curse here is not about swearing, it has to do with the consequences of not fulfilling the contract. Blessings and curses are motivators.

So law for the Hebrew was not cold, formal, or harsh. It was the natural consequence of a living relationship with God. Israel as a people rejoiced in the rules and regulations because they knew that the law also regulated God's behavior toward them. You see, the

pagan gods weren't like the God of Israel. The pagan gods could wake up on the wrong side of the bed and destroy 10,000 people just because they were in a bad mood. The pagan gods were lurking behind every tree in the forest. You never knew when you'd get slapped up-side the head with them. So to have a God who says, "I will abide by law" provided incredible security to the Israelites. They knew who they were dealing with. For them the rules and regulations were a very good thing and they loved them. Just read Psalm 119: *"I delight in your law (verse 70), . . . your law is my delight (77), . . . Oh, how I love your law! (97), . . . your law is my delight (174)."*

There was another reason they loved God's laws. Every so often some other nation played the bully against them. But they knew that with God that was never the end of the story. They could take those bullies to the court of God's judgment and sue for damages! In fact the Hebrew term for "lawsuit" appears throughout the Old Testament. Whenever things weren't going the way they were suppose to, God's people could bring a lawsuit.

So the Israelites did not fear law courts or God's judgment. They did not find them cold and abusive. They looked forward to God's judgment because they knew that when the judgment day came, their lawsuit would be heard, they were going to win and receive heavy damages from the enemy. Everything would be turned around. The oppressors would go down and God's people would be vindicated.

In the ancient pagan idea of God "might makes right." The pagan gods were gods because they were powerful, they weren't always good. The Greek gods were promiscuous, abusive, and inconsistent. What made them gods then? Raw, unrestrained power. The biggest bully on the street becomes God, so to speak. That's why the Old Testament concept

of God, as primitive as it may seem to some today, was such a wonderful advance at that time. The Old Testament says that God is mighty because He is right. He turns the pagan concept on its head. God deserves to be God because He is right, not because He is powerful. That is extremely important when you're oppressed.

The proper rule of law, therefore, is extremely important to a happy society. In recent years, the rule of law has broken down in Russia, in reaction to the abusive character of law in the communist years. The result is a sense of disorder. No one looks out for society as a whole, everyone looks only to their own selfish interests. Moscow, for example, is one of the greenest cities I've ever seen, which is certainly not what I expected. The problem is, nobody takes care of the greens, except in the Kremlin. In many places, the grass is allowed to grow six feet tall and there are all kinds of paths worn through it, the place looks chaotic. There's a sense that nobody cares. You know what happens in that kind of atmosphere? When law and order breaks down in the little things, it creates an atmosphere in which crime and lawlessness flourish.

My hometown is New York City. Crime has always been a major concern there. A new mayor was elected a few years ago. Without getting into the politics, I just want to note that he brought into office with him an idea that seemed strange at the time. His idea was, "If you allow people to ignore or despise the law in little things, you will lose control the big things." So instead of focusing primarily on the Mafia and the major criminal elements in the city, he promoted a campaign to make the city an unwelcome place for panhandlers, squeegee-men and grafitti artists. And he faced a storm of criticism right from the start.

What is a squeegee-man? It's a guy who comes up to your car at a red light and starts

spraying your windshield, offering to clean a bit of it for a dollar. What happens to the person driving the car? There's a sense of insecurity, there's a sense of, "Hey, wait a minute, don't touch my car!" The action is not wanted, it is forced upon you and you're even expected to pay for it, with occasional threats if you don't. The result is a feeling of insecurity and abuse. There's the sense that you are not in a safe place. Law-abiding citizens feel afraid.

The amazing thing is that by tackling the insecure environment, the whole atmosphere of the city changed. Take away the minor, yet obvious, abuses of law and the criminals begin to find the atmosphere unsafe. Today you see women walking alone on the streets of Manhattan at 11 PM, something I never saw as a kid. The Mafia is largely in hiding, something that had never happened before. In an atmosphere of respect for law, the major criminals begin to feel insecure and the people reclaim the streets. No one will claim that all segments of the city have benefitted equally from these policies, but all parts of the city seem to be safer and more orderly. It is far better to be ruled by law than by the whims of criminals or dictators.

So the biblical concept of God is that He is God because He is right, not because of His might. And He is safe because He subjects Himself to the same laws that He expects us to obey. The biblical concept of law is not cold and arbitrary, it is the throbbing heart of a stable society in relationship with a loving God. It is intimately tied to the history of Israel, to its experience with God as a people.

In Deut 26:3-10 we see this blending of history and law in one of Israel's great confessions of faith. When the Israelites became settled in their land they were required to bring the first fruits of the harvest in a basket to God's holy place and present it to a priest there (Deut 26:1-3). Then they were to recite the mighty acts of God to the priest. *"My father*

*was a wandering Aramean, and he went down into Egypt with a few people and lived there and became a great nation, powerful and numerous. But the Egyptians mistreated us and made us suffer, putting us to hard labor. Then we cried out to the LORD, the God of our fathers, and the LORD heard our voice and saw our misery, toil and oppression. So the LORD brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, with great terror and with miraculous signs and wonders."* Deut 26:5-8. In the Old Testament the laws have to do with a response to the great history of God's actions in behalf of His people. The keeping of the law and the rehearsing of God's mighty acts were two sides of the same coin.

Throughout the OT you will see the rehearsal of history and a sense of God's justice coming together. The Pentateuch, the five books of Moses at the beginning, are filled with both history and law. The Israelites were required by law to rehearse the history because it was vital to their relationship with God. In the history books that follow the Pentateuch, Joshua through 2 Chronicles, the basis for the history is the covenant. Each king is judged "good" or "evil" on the basis of how well he carried out the laws of God. The king who carried out the covenant was a "good" king; the king who did not was an "evil" king. When you get to the prophets, the same dynamic is in place. The people are judged on the basis of whether or not they have been faithful to the laws of God in the course of their actions in history.

The problem with covenant and law is that every one of us has a deep sense inside that we have not lived up to our own inner rules, much less those set by God. We have failed to live up to our own built-in need for justice. When I say to you, "You shouldn't have done that," what am I saying? That what you are doing is not right for you. I am passing judgment on your actions. But if I think it's not right for you, then it's not right for me either. Deep down inside

we hold ourselves accountable to the same rules we point out to others. And that leaves us in a discouraging situation.

Rom 2:1-3: *“You therefore have no excuse, you who pass judgement on somebody else, for at whatever point you judge the other, you are condemning yourself, because you who pass judgement do the same things. Now we know that God’s judgement against those that do such things is based on truth. So when you, a mere man, pass judgement on them yet do the same things, do you think you will escape God’s judgement?”* Sobering thought. Paul here picks up on the idea that when we criticize other people we are really passing judgement on ourselves. The more we criticize others the more we are weighed down with our own sense of failure.

The Bible teaches, therefore (and experience seems to confirm), that the greatest of all human needs is to be counted right in the end. The need, when our whole life experience is summed up, for some great judge in the sky to put a hand on my shoulder and say, “you did all right buddy. Everything is going to be all right.” The greatest of all human needs is to be right in the final judgment. What hope is there that we might actually be able to experience such affirmation? The answer lies in a deeper look at the Bible’s concept of covenant, which we will do in the next two chapters.