

Lawlessness, or Our Sinful State?
 . . . Hope in a Hopeless World
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 Texts: Matt. 1:20-25; Galatians 5:1-5
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 First Sunday in Advent: HOPE

Behold, I am standing by the spring, and may it be that the maiden who comes out to draw and to whom I say, “Please let me drink a little water from your jar”; and she will say, “You drink and I will draw for your camels also;” let her be the woman whom the Lord has appointed for my master’s son.” (Gen. 43-44) Now that is an expression of hope. It is spoken into the hopelessness of Abraham’s succession situation in Canaan—a pool of Canaanite candidates for Isaac’s wife, but Abraham is loathe to draw from. We could read this “arranged marriage” as an act of discrimination. Abraham discriminating against Canaanite women—or as Abraham being selective about the woman who will join his family as Isaac’s wife, his daughter-in-law. Against, or for, or both. Eliezer, Abraham’s steward, recounts his prayer request for this sign (if I say this, and she responds like this, let that supply direction and confirm the Lord’s choice). His prayer is faithful, and he is relying on divine direction as if saying, “Lord, reveal your will and your choice in this vital matter.” A word of hope spoken into being!

And it is also written: **23 “Behold, the virgin will ^[a]conceive and give birth to a Son, and they shall name Him ^[b]Immanuel,” which translated means, “God with us.” 24 And Joseph awoke from his sleep and did as the angel of the Lord commanded him, and took *Mary* as his wife, 25 ^[c]but kept her a virgin until she gave birth to a Son; and he named Him Jesus.**¹ Behold, this is another word of hope (and fulfillment of prophecy). Whether in obedience to the angel (Mary) or in fulfillment of prophecy (Matthew), the name Immanuel (“God with us”) emerges as Jesus (“God is salvation”). This word uttered in either 6 BC, or in 1 AD was spoken into a tumultuous moment in Palestinian history—a very violent time. Popular uprisings and revolts against Roman authority/occupation carried out by angry mobs of armed zealots and subdued by Roman soldiers—Palestine was a tinder box of sedition and lawlessness. They needed a word of hope very much as we, in America, do today. I am going to take the briefest of excursions into some current events to build this bridge between our times and the times of Jesus’ advent—remembering that advent is about freedom. Freedom is proclaimed in Jesus’ name in the midst of turmoil and strife, he was sent into our hopelessness to proclaimed liberty to those held captive then, or now. We will quickly return to ask “Where is Christ in the crossfire of our current acrimony?”

¹Footnotes

- a. Matthew 1:23 Or *be pregnant*
- b. Matthew 1:23 Gr *Emmanuel*
- c. Matthew 1:25 Lit *and did not know her intimately*

Lawlessness. Armed black men showed up at the Ahmaud Arbery trial, at a courthouse in Georgia on Monday, Nov. 22, 2021: "Ya'll are in serious trouble because the wrath of karma is coming on America," said a man who identified himself as the supreme commander of the [New Black Panther militia](#). "We're not taking it no more." This act of intimidation and threats, regardless of what "the wrath of karma" refers to, suggests that violence will greet the outcome of the trial there. These protesters are not satisfied with justice running its course. There is the second repudiation of the verdict of trial by jury in two weeks! The media and some political figures are playing along with this active lawlessness, seeking to take advantage of the rage, hatred and divisiveness that, I say this in condemnation, undercuts any confidence that we might have in our judicial system. The karma of mob violence—if that is what it is—signifies how lawlessness become hopelessness. If Ahmaud was murdered, shot in an incident of mistaken identity (mis-identified as a home invader?), those who ended his life (acting as vigilantes?) should be convicted of whatever crimes were committed, held accountable and punished by due process, through the courts and the laws of the land. Ahmaud deserves justice—color-blind justice. Period.

This unfolds against the backdrop of armed criminals (thugs, thieves and looters) in the streets, destroying property, looting, stealing, assaulting, injuring and threatening to murder others. This is America's current anarchy; it is in fact lawlessness. ***And as such it spawns fear and hopelessness!*** The deeper dilemma is this: how does lawlessness differ from our sinful condition? What if they are synonymous, legitimately interchangeable? And what is the impact of this?

Where is Christ in the crossfire of our current acrimony? In our sinful and hopeless state? *He is in our midst, working salvation.*

We are Christians, living in a republic where the rule of law is absolutely crucial and. In a compelling demonstration that there is **nothing new under the sun**, we find ourselves confronting the same conflict, the conflict between the rule of law and lawlessness, that Paul is addressing in Galatians! That's no surprise. Indeed, it is a persuasive, or compelling piece of evidence that as creatures living in a fallen world, the tendency towards lawlessness is always with us. Yet what is surprising, and hopefully so, is that Christ came and entered into our world as it is—not as we might wish it to be!—and demonstrated how the way is through, not around.

First, let's look at the assertion: **There's nothing new under the sun**. Even if we take a cursory look around us; there is technology to challenge this adage, or "proverb." ***Surely a new I-phone is new.*** There are hundreds of innovations and developments (of Cars and Trucks and Things That Go as Richard Scary puts it!) which call the "nothing new" into question. But **nothing new** is "true" if we consider other things than the difference between rayon, nylon and synthetic fibers (versus animal skins, or organic textiles!) and high tech gadgetry.

For instance: how about "trial by jury, a jury of one's peers . . . and the presumption of innocence" which have, up until now, been cornerstones of American jurisprudence.

These legal constructs have an arguably biblical foundation. As I tried to explain while preaching on Exodus 18, the judicial arrangement of Hebrew society there, under Moses as advised by his father-in-law Jethro.

We were exposed to the idea that litigants, those in dispute, would come to Moses seeking **a word from the Lord: when they have a dispute, they come to me and I decide between one person and another, and I make them know the statutes of God and His laws.** (v. 16) And because each party had entered litigation desiring to know God's will, then, when the word of the Lord is laid out before them, there is mutual submission to that word². **And this people will go to their place in peace.** (v. 23)

And the administration of justice was assisted by the appointment of judges: **Moreover look for able men from all the people, men who fear God, who are trustworthy and hate a bribe, and place such men over the people as chiefs of thousands, hundreds, fifties and tens.** (It is significant that ten heads of household, being men of faith, constitute the legitimate foundation of a synagogue—which implies that the administration of justice was entirely dependent on community, on relationships of mutual knowledge and respect for the laws of God.) *These men, who feared God, who were trustworthy and hated bribery had righteous dispositions—they could execute justice in the land. That has not changed!* This is how law is enacted, and lawfulness is maintained. There were rules of evidence and testimony (eyewitnesses were to be trustworthy ones—and several were required to attain indictment, or prove guilt.).

“Trial by a jury of one's peers,” a cornerstone of American jurisprudence, came to us by way of British jurisprudence—both the good and the bad. Good judges, biblically speaking, were to execute justice in the land! The common law injustice of being tried by non-peers resulted in our securing of a constitutional right to trial by jury, a progressive reform. The use of law by the rich and the powerful to have their way with “the underclass” was hindered by this requirement! And, as for the presumption of innocence until proven guilty, this clause was added to put a wall between prejudicial prosecution, political show trials and the travesties of mob rule such as vigilante justice, lynchings and “murder” of parties under the passion of outrage over crimes committed. Guilt became something the state, or governing authorities would have to “produce in court,” after weighing evidence and testimonies. **Deliberation of the facts and not rushes to judgment are valued.**

It seems to be the case, that lawlessness and violence result whenever these fundamentals are set aside. That is what the Jewish Christians were opposing Paul over. They believed that righteousness came from *obedience to the Law* with the corollary that if the Law was set aside, lawlessness, anarchy and violent would prevail. And common life would become hellish. *Now, the first thing that should be admitted is that they do have a point.* The abolition of law-keeping will bring chaos and disorder—as we see. “Looting is reparation” is voiced as a justification for stealing from others

² This is very different from our lawsuit mindset where we seek vindication via damages. This reflects the oppressive circumstances condemned in scripture where the wealthy dispossessed widows and orphans (lawful, of course) and enslaved their country men through debts and indenture. That was a system of injustice! Systemic greed and theft.

(those who have nothing to do with our history of white on black oppression). Justice is hung out to dry and wicked men leverage the situation to sin **(to kill, steal and destroy)** even more egregiously, brazenly.

This view is a negative posture with regard to human nature. Even those who disagree with those who claim that lawfulness aligns with righteousness say **All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. . . None is righteous, no not one.** And they often add such quips as **Well, nobody's perfect . . . to sin is human.** They are rationalizing sin. They say, **I have done nothing wrong** impudently . . . they argue that sinning is what sinners do, **so what of it?**

But the hard truth is that *God expects better of us, He expects moral perfection.* The end of the Law is declared to be **perfect righteousness.** The sacrificial system could not achieve that standing—being imperfect, temporary and transitional (according to Paul at least). *Sacrifices could express remorse and repentance and they were pleasing to God and were expressly commanded by Him.*

The real contention is not about the perfect outcome God demands, it is about how one obtains that outcome. Bottom line: **We can't; but God can and does so.** By being with us, and communicating his nature to us, Christ in us, **the hope of glory,** brings us through—it perfects us after it improves us. **We are set free from our bondage to sin, its dominion, to live and act as children of the Most High.**

You must be born-again. Boy, is that ever true!

Paul argues that while the Law (especially the prohibition on covetousness) brought him to the end of himself (it broke him spiritually), it remains “useful.” He therefore embraces the Law as a tutor, and as Teacher; however, he argues, vehemently, that it was impotent when it came to salvation! *But that does not mean that God ceased to expect perfect obedience as the basis for righteousness.* **Man gets that perfect obedience from His Son and thus fulfilled the just demands of the Law perfectly.** Jesus, as the perfect sacrifice attained atonement on behalf of those for whom he came to save. **By grace we have been saved, and that not of ourselves.** And, subsequently, the benefits of Christ's perfect obedience accrue to us (that is the heart of substitutionary atonement). We obtain forgiveness just as we obtain perfection from God on Jesus' coat-tails, so to speak.

What Paul is disputing about with the Jewish Christians centers on this matter: if the Law does not justify, what exactly does it do? What is its role and function? Is anyone justified by works of the Law?! He says, no one. That is where the argument lies. Only One has ever fulfilled the Law perfectly and He did so to save us.

So Moses followed the advice of Jethro and his appointees **and they judged the people at all times. Any hard case they brought to Moses, but any small matter they decided themselves.** (Exodus 18:26) That is a good thing.

A precise parallel to our contemporary situation is found in these dueling narratives. I believe that is likely, as with most dueling narratives, that the parties to either side are

talking right past each other. They are not listening and they have cast off any and all dependence on the word of the Lord, or the overt discerning of the will of God. If that behavior persists, it may well be, as Jordan Peterson says, “There is no meeting in the middle.” When science goes political, then science has descended into a matter of party and opinion, coercion and power. Where tyranny of opinion prevails, it is vital for each side to control the narrative (by manipulation and spin) and of this political partisans and media are hugely aware—making it a matter of might and control rather than right and true and just. They have ushered us into an unforgiving world of no acquittal, of no repentance—the wrath of karma.

When Jesus makes it clear that there is “no wrath of karma!” However, he has no message of *salvation for the righteous*, as when he declares, **It is not the healthy who have need of a physician.** We see two things: first He conceded that one can commend himself to God by law-keeping—but, note, this does not mean anything beyond a self-justifying opinion. But such individual will rebuff any offer of salvation based on faith in the finished and perfect work of the Savior! They self-exclude themselves. They are, of course, free to that because that is what freedom entails. Prostitutes and publicans will enter into heaven before them. And, that doesn’t mean that anti-nominalism won’t erupt, disrupting social order.

There is another side to this. This is what provokes Paul the most—I think. If one believes that righteousness comes through keeping the law, then Christ died needlessly. (Gal. 2:21) This is unthinkable—it guts the sufficiency of Christ’s atoning death. Justification by faith and our radical dependence on grace, which were emergent truths (something new!) in the time of Galatians; they were truths that would unfold through further and deeper reflection on Jesus’ death and resurrection. They underscore the necessity of the cross and they establish why Paul determined to **know Christ and Him crucified** only in his evangelistic outreach.

Now this narrative, the necessity of Christ’s atoning sacrifice, perfect obedience and resurrection power, it the one true narrative. It is our hope because it is the redemption of God for those who believe! We cannot afford to let its competitors, in the minds of our friends and neighbors—for example, the idea that race explains everything³ (which is the lifeline of liberal progressivism, and of the political left) is not only false it is vacuous—meaning, that what it explains amounts to nothing. It is a humanistic/secular credo which shifts salvation back onto the track of works—*something we can do to redeem ourselves*—which damns many and saves none. Indeed, it is left up to us . . . that would be entirely hopeless.

Amen

³ It is crucial for us to disavow completely the poisonous idea of “white Christianity.” What is meant by “whiteness” (by the progressives) is in complete antithesis to what it means to be Christian. “White” is irrelevant. Jesus took down that dividing wall. The testimony of the worldwide church is inter-racial and has been so from the beginning. Segregation of churches is, from my point of view, an anathema. This is a “wedge” construct, a weapon formed by the enemies of Christ to bring division and strife into the church. But if we do not oppose and refute it, there are those who will labor to make it stick. Beware and be clear. Vigilant. Do not be misled by vain philosophy.