

[10 Commandments E3: Commands for Life Given to Noah and Abraham]
[Speakers in the audio file: Jon Collins and Tim Mackie]

Jon:

The commands of God are meant for life. Last week we looked at the first command of God in the Bible called a *mitsvah*, and it's in the garden of Eden story, when God invites humans into the abundant life of the garden, and he tells them, "Eat up! Enjoy!" But he also teaches them how to discern good from bad. And to do that, they need to learn to listen to his voice.

Today we'll look at the second time the word "command" is used in the Bible. It's in the story of Noah and his instructions to build an ark. And this command is also about finding and preserving life.

Tim:

Make a box, cram it full of life, and go into the box, stay there, and you will stay alive. So the ark is presented as a little Eden refuge.

Jon:

So in the first command, Adam and Eve fail. But in the second command, Noah succeeds. And this leads us to the third person to get the command of God—Abraham. And Abraham's response is, well...complicated. Sometimes he does the command, and sometimes he sort of does them.

Tim:

So Abraham's story is really giving us an in-depth portrait now. He does the command, so it does lead to the preservation of his life and a lot of blessing. But also, he, like, doesn't do it completely—

Jon:Hmm.

Tim:And that leads to also a bunch of heartache now. So it's like a third variation on a human relating to God's commands.

Jon:All of this leads up to God giving Abraham a seemingly impossible command: surrender back to God the life of his son. And when Abraham obeys this command, it doesn't lead to death. It leads to more life.

Tim:When human beings trust and obey the command, what they find is that what looked like death becomes this passageway to the gift of life. And not just life for themselves, but then life for all these other people.

Jon:

All of these stories are inviting us into a posture of trust, to listen to God's voice, and to expect that the commands of God are for life.

Tim:

But on Abraham's best day, when he trusts God, and when he actually acts on that trust by surrendering his own family's future, what he finds is that keeping the command leads to life.

Jon:

Now, we're looking at the theme of the commands of God because this all leads us to the ten commands, where God gives Israel at Mount Sinai ten words of how to be mediators of life in the world—if they can listen to his voice and keep his commands.

Tim: The Ten Commandments are God's invitation to preserve life—that you're images of God, and so when you do what I say, you will both increase our own partnership and intimacy, and it will be what's good for you and good for all the people around you.

Jon:

That's today on the podcast. Thanks for joining us. Here we go.

[pause]

Jon:

Hello, Tim!

Tim:

Hi, Jon.

Jon:

Hi. We are in this series on the Ten Commandments.

Tim:

Mhmm. We are.

But to set the ten commands—the famous ten—in the context of the biblical storyline, I brought us back to the beginning to God's first command. Like the actual word "command" is used in the garden of Eden story.

Jon: Yeah. Okay.

Tim: The one command.

Jon:

The one that was also given to—

Tim:

You had one job.

[laughter]

Jon: Eat, eat.

[laughter]

Tim: Yeah. Actually, the one command had three parts—

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: It had two basic elements to the command, which—

Yeah. One was, “Eat from all the trees”—

Jon: Yeah.

Tim:

First of all, just enjoy.

Jon:

Mmhmm. And—

Tim: Enjoy the trees.

Jon: And then the second is about the one tree.

Tim: Mmhmm.

Jon: The tree of knowing good and bad.

Tim: Yeah.

Jon: Don't eat of that one.

Tim: Yep. That's right. Cause—

Jon: That's the command.

Tim: From the day you eat of it, you'll die. So God's command is about instructing you on the way to life. Eat from all of the trees. Do what will lead to life. And then the flip of that is there is one thing that will not only not lead to life, it will lead to the end of your life. And so don't do that thing.

There's one do. There's one don't. But both of them are about protecting, preserving—

Jon:
And finding life.

Tim.
And finding life. Yes! And that really, we could just—

That's it. God's commands are guiding his creatures who have less wisdom towards life. But the goal of the command is to teach you the way to life so that you begin to really own and appreciate that for yourself. Not just because God said it, but because you realize it's true. True for you. So there it is.

So the humans don't follow that command. They're foolish. They make a foolish move. They're ignorant. They are culpable, like they're accountable for violating the command. But they are deceived. They're led to believe something that's not true about God's command and about God's character. It leads them away from life towards death.

So what we're gonna see, then, is the humans are exiled then from Eden. And to make a long story short, although it's only about a page and half—

Jon:A lot of text.

Tim:
So to make a short story shorter, I guess—humans just go about unleashing a tidal wave of multi-generational violence and bloodshed throughout the land. This is the sordid tale of Genesis 4, 5, and 6, where the words “kill” and “dying” and “blood” just start leaping off the page. Whereas in Eden's story, it was about trees and life and sprouting and waters—

Jon:Rivers—

Tim:Yeah. Exactly. So what happens is the famous story that takes a turn in Genesis 6 is God sees that humanity is indeed being fruitful and multiplying, but what they are multiplying on the land is violence.

And so God sees one guy, however. A guy named “Rest”—Noah. And what we're told is that Noah is a righteous one. This is Genesis 6 verse 9. That he is blameless, tamim. He is a person of whole character among his generation. And not only that, he walks...he walks about with Elohim.

Jon:
So he's doing the thing that Adam and Eve were meant to do.

Tim:

Mmhmm, yeah. After Adam and Eve foolishly violate God's command, God comes for the walkabout—it's the Hebrew word halakh—in the garden for the daily walkabout—

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: In the wind of the day.

Jon: Mmhmm.

Tim: And they're freaked out, and they hide.

Jon: Yeah.

Tim:
But Noah? Dude, he walks about. He just walks. He walks with Elohim.

Jon:
Are we supposed to then think of him as one who hasn't taken wisdom on his own terms?

Tim:
Yeah, that's a great question. I mean, he does do something pretty dumb right after the flood.

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: He plants a garden, consumes of its fruit, gets drunk and then naked, and his son takes advantage of that.

Jon:
That's later.

Tim: That's later. Right now we're just told, this guy's rad. This guy is—

Jon:
Blameless.

Tim: Righteous, blameless. He walks with Elohim. He's like a new Adam.

Jon:
Now, when you call someone blameless, one way to think about that is that they're perfect. They've never made any mistakes. Is that the idea here?

Tim:

Yeah. I mean, we don't know. The narrator clearly wants us to see him as the single righteous, blameless one in that whole generation. And his righteousness counts not just for himself but for others—

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: Like his family. Everybody in the—

And all the animals.

Jon:
So it sounds like—

Tim: And—

Jon: You kind of need to think of him that way.

Tim: Yeah. And then God says, "I'm gonna make a covenant with you." And then Noah gets off the boat, and he surrenders the life of this animal, and God accepts that surrender as an act of covering for all creation.

So Noah becomes an image of the righteous intercessor. And he's a part of the series of characters that lead up to the model of the suffering servant in the book of Isaiah. This, like, righteous, human, almost divine figure, whose intercession leads to God declaring the many righteous—

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: On behalf of the acts of the one.

Jon: Okay.

Tim: So we're setting up—

It's more like the righteous intercessor model.

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: If God has one person to work with, he'll do it.

So, you know, Job and Ecclesiastes will come along later and be like, "You know, nobody really can be totally righteous"—

Jon: Right.

Tim:But that's not on the table in this story. We're trying to set up a pattern, I think.

Jon:Hmm. Okay.

Tim:

And as we're gonna see, God gives him a command, and he does it. In fact, here it is.

Jon:Okay.

Tim:So, Genesis 6 verse 11: "The land was ruined before Elohim"—before God. "The land was filled with violence, and Elohim saw the land and look, it was ruined. All flesh had ruined its way on the land. So Elohim said to Noah"—

Here we go. God's first words to Noah: "The end of all flesh has come up before me."

We've talked about this important line in the past.

Jon:Yeah, I don't remember.

Tim:So—

[laughter]

Tim:If you read some English, modern English translations, they'll translate this as God saying, "I have decided to bring an end to all flesh."

Jon:

Oh, right.

Tim:That is not what it says.

Jon:Mmm—

Tim:

It says, "The end of all flesh has come up before me because the land is filled with violence."

So humans are destroying themselves and the end of all humans—

Jon:It's happening.

Tim:It's becoming very evident to me that they're gonna destroy themselves.

Jon:Okay.

Tim: So what God says is, "Look, I am going to ruin them with the land." That's what God says. So humans have set something in motion, and God's going to accelerate it. Sounds exactly like what will happen later in the next repetition of this theme with the pharaoh and the plagues of Egypt. Pharaoh—

Jon: Oh.

Tim: Kickstarts—right?—a campaign of violence against the Israelites, and then God accelerates that and brings it to its end in de-creating Egypt. So the flood, something similar here.

Anyhow. So that's just God saying, "Hey, Noah, here's the situation." So Genesis six—

Jon: Things are bad.

Tim: Yep.

Jon:
I'm gonna press fast-forward on this—

Tim: Mmhmm. Yeah.

Jon:
And we're gonna just get this done.

Tim: That's right.

Jon:
Okay.

Tim: Yep. So Genesis six verse 14 is God's second command. It's not called a command yet, but it is God's second command to a human—

Jon: Okay.

Tim: In the biblical story. The command to the human in Eden was the first one. Now, this is the second one.

Jon: If this isn't called a command, but we're calling it a command—

Tim:
It is called a command. Just, you gotta wait for it.

Jon:

You gotta wait for it.

Tim: Just wait—yeah.

Jon: So this is the second thing called a command.

Tim: Yep.

Jon: Okay.

Tim:

Yep. Genesis 6 verse 14, “Make for yourself a tevah.” In Hebrew, a box.

[laughter]

Actually, this is a whole rabbit hole—

“Tevah” is translated “ark,” famously Noah’s ark.

Jon:

Yeah.

Tim: It’s a loan word from the ancient Egyptian language, meaning “box.” But most often, it’s most typically used for a coffin.

Jon:

Oh.

Tim:

A coffin!

Jon:

Interesting.

Tim:

Which is so fascinating—

Jon: Yeah.

Tim:

Because—

Jon: Make for yourself a coffin.

Tim:

The purpose of this box is to, as we're going to see, preserve life.

Jon:

But by going through the death.

Tim:

But—

Jon:The chaos.

Tim:In a way by floating through the waters that bring death.

Jon:

Wow. Yeah.

Tim:

So a fascinating word choice. Anyway, make for yourself an ark. That's the command. And then there's things about the dimensions of the ark, make it with a window and a—

Jon:This is how you know it's a rectangle.

Tim:Door—

Yes. Yeah. And there's all kinds of interesting speculation about the precise shape of the ark. But the point is, it's a big rectangle. Three hundred cubits long, 50 cubits wide, 30 cubits high.

Jon:It's like a big container.

Tim:It's a big rectangle.

Jon:Which do float if those fall out in the water, you know, off a ship—

Tim:Yeah.

Jon:

A big cargo ship.

Tim:It would. Totally would float—

Jon:

Those float around.

Tim:Mmhmm.

Jon:Yeah.

Tim:Anyhow. So make the ark.

Jon:Yeah.

Tim:Why? Well, verse 18, "I'm going to make a covenant with you. And you are going to go into that ark—you, your sons, your wife, your sons' wives, and every thing, every living thing of all flesh. Two of everything, you will make them go into the ark. Why? To keep them alive with you."

Jon:Yeah.

Tim:

And then again, verse 20, "Everybody go into the ark to keep them alive."

And then verse 22, Genesis six: "And Noah did according to everything that Elohim commanded him"—

Jon:

Okay.

Tim:"So he did it."

Jon:

And there's the word "command."

Tim:

There it is. He did the command. Adam and Eve didn't do the command. And it led them to death.

Jon:

The command is build this little sanctuary, that's like a coffin.

[laughter]

Tim:Yeah.

Jon:Stuff it full of life.

Tim:

Yes. Yeah.

Jon:

And get in.

Tim:

And get in. Yeah, and it said...it's repeated twice. And actually this little paragraph from Genesis 6, 18 to 20, it's a little symmetry. And at the key, like, lines at the beginning and end are to keep alive, to preserve life.

Jon:Yeah.

Tim:

To make things still have life or prolong life. So it's a very simple equation. Humans are spreading death on the land. God's going to hand the creation over—back over to de-creation. Accelerate this process humans have set in motion. Make a box, cram it full of life, and go into the box, stay there, and you will stay alive. God's command is about the preservation of life.

Jon:

So we've got two commands so far and they're—

Yeah, it's interesting how we think of them together, because they're both pretty meta, in a way. Like the first one, "Eat of all the trees. So go and have life! Except don't go and have life the way that it's going to kill you." And—

[laughter]

Tim:

Don't do the thing that will kill you—

Jon:Yeah.

Tim:

But that doesn't look like it will kill you.

Jon:

Yeah.

Tim:Yeah.

Jon:So go and participate in life. Ah, but stay away from the thing that's gonna kill you. And you're not gonna know the difference, so listen to my voice.

Tim:Let me tell you.

Jon:

Let me tell you what it is.

Tim: Okay, yeah. Yes. Yeah.

Jon: That's command number one.

Tim: Yep.

Jon:

And then because we fail at that command, humanity fails at the command, things cycle into violence—so much so, that everything's gonna fall apart. And so the second command is, let me preserve life. We're going to preserve life in the midst of all this chaos.

Tim: That's right. That's right. In this big box. And you and your wife—

Jon: Coffin—

Tim: Your sons and their wives and the animals are gonna go live in this little wooden box. It's a box made of, you're specifically told, of trees. A box of trees. And you're gonna go stay alive in there.

Jon:

Yeah.

Tim: Yeah.

Jon:

It is a very specific command to build a very specific thing.

Tim: Yeah.

Jon: The idea is, I want to preserve life. I need you to participate with me in the preservation of life.

Tim:

That's right. And I left out one thing.

Jon: Okay.

Tim: Which is, God also, in verse 21, Genesis six, accounts for all the food that they're going to need.

Jon: Oh, okay.

Tim: Take for yourself all of this edible food that you're going to eat. And it will be edible food for yourself and for them. It's the same word used as for, "The tree was for eating."

Jon: Oh.

Tim:
So God is providing food—

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: Just like he did for Adam and Eve. So the ark is presented as a little Eden refuge. But except another difference then, is that God provided the Eden refuge in the middle of the wilderness in Genesis two. Now here, God's partner, his covenant partner, is supposed to create the little Eden refuge out of trees.

Jon: Yeah.

Tim:
And God will provide the food, and he'll lead the animals, you know, to them. But this puts a little more, what do you say, of the burden of partnership on Noah. Noah has to obey God's command, or else all this stuff will die, including himself.

Isn't that interesting?

Jon: Sure.

Tim: God made the refuge of Eden.

Jon: Yeah, okay.

Tim: Here Noah has to make the refuge. And that's the command. Make this little refuge for the preservation of life.

Jon:
Build a mini-Eden.

Tim:
Yeah. So in that sense they're different. But in the sense that they're similar, it's the second command. It's the word sivvah. Genesis 6 verse 22. And then there's another kind of summary of the speech in Genesis seven verses one through five, where there's another set of instructions. You go into the ark, cause I'm going to send rain. That's new information. And you are going to keep alive seed on the face of the land by going into the ark. That's Genesis seven verse three. And then 7:5, "Noah did according to all that Yahweh commanded."

So there's two speeches from God. Both are called commands. And they're both about the preservation of life.

So that's what Noah does. He does it.

[pause]

Tim:

Okay, so God's two speeches, two commands to Noah, are about the preservation of life. After that, what God said would happen, happens. The flood comes, which is a cosmic de-creation—the collapse of the cosmos. The waters that God split apart, you know, all collapse in on themselves.

Jon:

Yeah. But there's this, like, seed floating—

Tim:

Yeah. Yes. There's this little—

Jon: Full of seed.

Tim: Refuge of preservation of life and seed and food made of trees—

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: Floating in the death waters. Yeah. And then—

Jon: The coffin, the tevah.

Tim: And then Genesis one kicks in again. God sends a spirit—a wind—out blowing over the waters. The waters recede. This ark box, you know, floats around and ends up—

Jon: It rests on a mountain.

Tim: On the top of a mountain. The waters recede, the dry land appears, plants appear—

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: Up out of the ground—

Jon: Okay.

Tim: And so on. You're like, "Oh, okay." And Noah waits three cycles of seven days. You know, famous sending out of the raven and the dove.

Jon: To know when it's safe to come out.

Tim:

Yeah. And when he knows it's safe is when the dove returns with a plant in its mouth that sprouts up out of the ground. So it's days one, two, and three—

Jon:

Of Genesis one?

Tim: Yeah, of Genesis one, all kind of re-kicking off.

So, Noah and his family get off the boat. Noah surrenders the life of a blameless and pure animal. And God states again his commitment to humanity, his partnership with them. And God also promises that no more cosmic de-creations.

So that's one thing. This whole very important part of the biblical story. But the point is God's covenant partner obeyed the command.

Jon:

Okay, so there's a big failing of the command, but then a big success at the command.

Tim:

Yeah, that's right.

Jon: Okay.

Tim: Yeah.

Jon: One and two—

Tim: That's right.

Jon: Failure, success.

Tim: Yeah. So now we have two stories. We have the Adam and Eve story, and that led to breaking of the command.

Jon: And death and violence.

Tim: It led to death and violence that spread on such a scale that the cosmos collapsed in on itself. And God let it. God accelerated it.

But then you have this contrast figure of a righteous, devout, blameless, covenant keeper. And he listens to God's command, and he does it. And it results in the preservation of life.

And then God says, Genesis 9, to this new Adam and Eve, Noah and his wife, "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the land." God blesses them.

Jon: Same command to—

Tim: Yep.

Jon: That was to the humans—

Tim: Yeah.

Jon: In Genesis one.

Tim:
So it's these contrast portraits—

Jon:
It's so interesting, you've got Adam and Eve are in the land, things are good, and they break the command. You got Noah—

Tim: Oh yeah.

Jon: He's in a land full of violence.

Tim: Yeah.

Jon:
Things are bad—

Tim: He keeps the command.

Jon: But he keeps the command.

Tim: And it leads to life.

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: That's it. Yep, that's it.

So what happens again, however, is that Noah doesn't fully repeat the Adam and Eve failure, but he does plant a garden, and he consumes the fruit of the garden, and he gets drunk and naked. It's all these echoes of Adam and Eve, like, "Oh, bummer..."—

Jon: Yeah, but it's very—

Tim: Bummer.

Jon: Obscure.

Tim: It's obscure, and we're not—

God didn't tell him, "Don't drink the fruit of your vines." You know, of your grapes. But he does pull a pretty stupid move. And then it's his son that takes advantage of him—his son Ham.

So from there, the story then focuses on Noah's sons and their descendants. And one of them, that son who took advantage of Noah—

I'm just glossing over gigantic, complicated, amazing parts of the story—

But through Noah's son Ham, it leads you to this guy named "We Will Rebel"—Nimrod—who builds a couple kingdoms, namely Assyria and Babylon.

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: And then—

Job: The two big bad ones.

Tim:

Totally. And then the people of Babylon build the tower of Babylon—that is, the tower of Babel.

Jon:

Okay.

Tim: Babel is the Hebrew word for Babylon.

Jon:

Yeah.

Tim: And God's response to Babylon is like, "Oh man, if this is what humans do when they all get together and are unified...man, nothing will be impossible for them to accomplish. They're gonna destroy everything, including themselves, again."

This time through the form of not just violence, but like—

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: Through imperial violence.

Jon:

So last time I fast forwarded it, and we just took care of it. This time—

Tim:

Yeah. God confuses the language and scatters Babylon.

Jon:

Okay. Slows it down.

Tim: Slows it down. Totally. So maybe just as a footnote, we've talked about this story in depth—

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: Multiple times. Maybe I'll footnote back to our podcast series on "The Day of the Lord" and on "The City"—

Jon: Okay.

Tim: Where we talk about the Babylon story in...in a lot more depth.

But God scatters. It confuses the languages, and the people of Babylon scatter. And out of that scattering, the narrator follows one particular family that lived in the region of Babylon and that ended up migrating west. And, lo and behold, who is this? This is the family of Abraham. It's actually his dad that begins a migration out of the region of Babylon and goes west.

But then at a certain moment, God appears to Abraham, and these are the famous words in Genesis 12 verse one: "Yahweh said to Abram, 'Go out from your land, from your relatives, from the house of your father to the land that I'll show you.'"

Now it doesn't say it's a command—

Jon: Yeah—

Tim:

It just—

Jon: But it's clear directions.

Tim:

Yeah, clear directive. Yes. And then we're told, "And Abram went out as Yahweh told him."

Jon: Okay.

Tim: So Yahweh said, "Do this"—

Jon:

Abraham does it.

Tim: Abraham did as Yahweh said.

Jon: Okay.

Tim:

And this begins an interesting pattern throughout the Abraham story, where Abraham is told he's now the vehicle of God's blessing. The blessing God gave to Adam and Eve, the blessing that God gave to Noah and his wife. Now Abraham and his wife are the carriers of that Eden blessing to the nations. "In you, all the nations will be blessed. I'm going to bless you and make you a great nation."

So Abram goes out. He did what God said. You're like, "Sweet! Maybe this guy will be like a new Noah." But we are told one little detail here. Super interesting. God says, "Go out from your land and from your relatives in the house of your father," which means like your whole extended family, like kind of separate. And what we're told is, Abram went out, just as Yahweh told him, and Lot went with him. Lot's his nephew.

Jon:

Okay, Lot's his nephew.

Tim:

The son of his father's brother.

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: Mmhm.

Jon: And he brings him with him.

Tim: Yeah. Now his father's brother died. So Lot is—it seems like he's an adult, perhaps. We don't know—

Jon:

Yeah.

Tim: His age. So what's interesting is you kind of be like, "Oh man, that's rad. He's taken his nephew into his house. Like, that seems noble." But you know, there is going to be a lot of complications that happen because of him bringing along Lot.

So it raises this interesting question of, did he obey the command, kind of? And the narrator doesn't tell you. But this is a question mark in this kind of half-obedience to the command. And Lot's presence, you know, with Abram and Sarah ends up leading to a lot of heartache and conflict and family separation.

Jon:

You're saying that the command of God was, go from your land and from your relatives—

Tim:

Yes.

Jon: And so obviously he's bringing his immediate, well—he doesn't have kids.

Tim: He brings his wife.

Jon: He brings his wife.

Tim: That's right. And it seems like—

Jon: But his household, right? Does at this point does he have, like, servants or shepherds that work with him—

Tim: Yeah.

Jon: Or anything?

Tim:

We're...we're told that he has a larger group of people—

Jon: Yeah.

Tim:

That come with him.

Jon: And that's his...so that's his household—

Tim:

It's not just the two of them. Yeah, that's right—

Jon:But when it says “away from your relatives”—

Tim:Yeah. You would think that would include—

Jon:
Your nephew.

Tim:Yeah, unless you fully adopted him. But the narrative doesn’t say that.

Jon:Okay.

Tim:So just what’s interesting is you have Adam and Eve, who were given a command—

Jon:Yeah.

Tim:And they didn’t do it. It led to death.

Jon:Yeah.

Tim:And you had Noah. He was righteous. He did the command, and it led to life.

Jon:Okay.

Tim:Now we have a third person that God gives a command—

Jon:Uh-huh.

Tim:
And now it’s even a new twist where—

Jon:
He sort of does it.

Tim:He does it....mostly. But not in this one part.

Jon:And Lot went with him.

Tim:
Yeah. And it’s—

Jon:And there’s a lot in that sentence.

Tim:Totally. Whoa. Yeah, good pun.

And so now this third twist on...this third portrait of how a human responds to God's commands is he does the command, so it does lead to the preservation of his life and a lot of blessing. But also he, like, doesn't do it completely. And that leads to also a bunch of heartache now. So it's like a third variation on a human relating to God's commands.

Jon:Interesting.

Tim:

So there's multiple times when God will give Abraham more directives. In Genesis 13, after Abraham and Lot separate because their shepherds are fighting, God tells Abram, "Hey, go for a walkabout throughout the land."

Jon:Is it the same word?

Tim:Mm-hmm. Walk about throughout the land.

Jon:Okay.

Tim:Yeah. Yeah. It doesn't say that God goes with him.

Jon:Hmm. But you can kind of imagine that.

Tim:But you can kind of imagine it. Yeah. And interestingly, what you're told is—you're not told Abraham went for a walk through the land. What you're told is, he pitched his tent and came and settled by the Oaks of Mamre. And he built an altar to Yahweh.

Jon:This could be stop one.

Tim:It could be stop one. It could be he did the walk and then he settled, though it doesn't say that.

Jon:Hmm.

Tim:So, we're kind of like, what's...what's up with that?

Jon:Okay.

Tim:

There's a story in Genesis 15 where Abram's wondering, like, "Are you...God, are you gonna give me that big family that you promised?" God says, "Go look at the skies and count the stars."

Jon:

Hmm.

Tim:And—

Jon:Which is very difficult to do.

Tim:
Yep.

[laughter]

It totally is.

And we're told Abram goes outside, and he does it, and he trusts in God. And God reckons that trust as a sign of right relationship or righteousness between him and Abram.

After Abram and Sarah don't trust God to provide them a child, and so he sleeps with his Egyptian slave, Hagar, and that leads to a whole bunch of division and heartache in the family, God tells Abram, "You need to keep my covenant, and you need to go get circumcised, and every male in your house needs to get circumcised."

Jon:Hmm...

Tim:
It's not called a command, but it's a pretty clear instruction.

Jon:Mm-hmm.

Tim:And so we're told Abram took Ishmael his son and every male in his house, and he circumcised them all.

Jon:Okay.

Tim:
So we're seeing this pattern. Like, Abraham does what God says. When he half does what God says, it usually leads to problems. But then other times, he just does what God says. And it leads up to the—

Jon:And then sometimes he says he'll do what God says—

Tim:Yeah, totally—

Jon:And then he doesn't trust it—

Tim:

Oh, that's right. Yeah—

Jon:Yeah.

Tim:Yeah, exactly. Yeah.

Jon:
Yeah.

Tim:So Abraham's story is really giving us an in-depth portrait now. We had two binaries with Adam—

Jon:Yeah, right.

Tim:And Eve and Noah.

Jon:Yeah, yeah, yeah.

Tim:Very clear.

Jon:Very clear.

Tim:Break the command, leads to death. Keep the command, leads to life.

Jon:Hmm...

Tim:Abraham—it's just more complicated.

Jon:
Yeah and you get this...with Adam and Eve, you get this foolish couple who get deceived. With Noah, you have this blameless person who just seems to like, "I...I get it."

Tim:
He gets it, and he does it. Yeah.

Jon:And then with Abraham, you have someone with this very childlike faith who's like, "I get it. I'm gonna follow you." But then just bumbles his way through it.

Tim:Yeah. Yep. Sometimes gets it right. Sometimes gets it wrong. And actually the moment when he gets it most right is in Genesis 15, when he just believes in Yahweh. He trusts Yahweh's promise, and Yahweh reckons that to him as righteousness. And that's the same word that was used to describe Noah.

Jon:Right.

Tim:
So Noah was—

Jon:That kinda brings me back to my question. What does that mean—

Tim:Yeah.

Jon:
That he was righteous and blameless?

Tim:Well, to be righteous means that Noah does right by God and right by neighbor.

Jon:Yeah.

Tim:We know by this point in the story—

Jon:
Yeah, but at what point are you doing that well enough that you could be called righteous?

Tim:
Mmm. Well, just if you do it.

[laughter]

Jon:
Yeah. Just...just always do right by people.

Tim:Yeah.

Jon:Perfect.

Tim:Yeah. And I guess—

[laughter]

Yeah. Eh, you make mistakes. I don't know.

Jon:Can you? I guess that's my question.

Tim:
Clearly Abraham did.

Jon:

Clearly—

Tim:He made a lot of mistakes.

Jon:

Clearly Abraham did. And God said, “Well”—

Tim:And God takes what Abraham did on his best day—

Jon:Yeah, which was trust him.

Tim:And have that count for, like, his legacy.

Jon:Was that the move he was doing with Noah?

Tim:So interesting. We don't know.

Jon:We don't know.

Tim:

The story's not...story's not filled out. But with Abraham it is.

Jon:Yeah.

Tim:

And that I think is an interesting part of how the biblical story develops.

Jon:Okay.

Tim:In terms of very—

Jon:Two very simple portraits in a way. One more nuanced.

Tim:Yeah.

Jon:Yeah.

Tim:Exactly right. Now, what's interesting is that the times when Abraham only half-heartedly does what God commanded, like with Lot, it leads to a lot of trouble. And then when he and Sarah really don't trust what God said and they pull the Hagar move, then that leads to—

Jon:Hagar—

Tim:A lot of heartache.

Jon:Hagar's the—

Tim:Yeah.

Jon:Egyptian servant that he—

Tim:That's right. That he got pregnant.

Jon:He uses to get pregnant.

Tim:That's right. And then her son is Abraham's firstborn. Sarah doesn't like Hagar anymore.
Or—

Jon:Yeah.

Tim:Or that son.

Jon:Yeah. Relational strife just spirals—

Tim:Yeah.

Jon:Out of control.

Tim:And so they end up abusing, oppressing this Egyptian slave and her son and exiling them. And so God actually keeps Abraham accountable for the times that he didn't obey. And it leads up to the ultimate story of where God asks Abraham for the ultimate obedience, which is he asks God to sacrifice the life of his son, to surrender the life of the son that God gave to him.

He gave him Isaac through Sarah and—

Jon:It's the son by which his family will become great.

Tim:
Yes. God—

Jon:And then bless the nations.

Tim:That's right. God said through Isaac, the nations are going to be blessed. But now it seems like God—

Jon:Give him back—

Tim:

Is contradicting God—

Jon:Yeah.

Tim:By asking for the son back. So this command—

And again, it's not called a command yet.

Jon:Okay.

Tim:

But it is a command. "Take your son"—Genesis 22—"your only son, Isaac, whom you love. Go to the land of Moriah. Offer him as a burnt offering." Or as a going-up offering, on one of the mountains.

Jon:

Which is what Noah made.

Tim:

Yep. Yes, it is. Yes. So Abraham does this. And then the moment that Abraham's about to follow through, like he picks up the knife and the son's on the altar, God says, "Stop. Don't send out your hand against the boy."

And here's what God says. Genesis 22, verse 16: "I swear on oath by my own self,' declares Yahweh, 'because you have done this thing, you haven't withheld your only son, I will certainly bless you and multiply your seed like the stars of heaven, like the sand on the seashore. And all the nations on the land will be blessed through your seed because you listened to my voice.'"

Jon:

Mmhmm. Okay. This is the theme of listening to God's voice. This is the theme of the command.

Tim:Yeah. Yes!

Jon:What's so interesting is, in all three of these examples, God's command feels like a type of death.

Tim:Yes, it does.

Jon:

And I don't know if this is really important to our conversation, but it's just really jumping out at me.

Tim:Yeah, that's good.

Jon:
For Adam and Eve—

Tim: That's great.

Jon: It feels like you're withholding something from me.

Tim: Yep.

Jon: It's a death to my desire.

Tim: Yeah, to have the knowledge of good and bad on...on my own time, in my own way.

Jon:
Yeah, it's a small type of death—

Tim: Yeah, but it's a—

Jon: Or surrender.

Tim: Yeah. Mmhmm.

Jon:
For Noah, it's like, crawl into this coffin.

Tim:
Yeah. Crawl into this...into this tevah.

Jon: Yeah.

Tim:
Yes.

Jon: And I will preserve you.

Tim: Mmhmm.

Jon:
Go through the chaos waters.

Tim: Yep.

Jon: And then for Abraham, ultimately, it's—yeah, give me back your son. And surrender that life. And they're all moments of going, "You know what? This command feels like me walking into death"—

Tim: Yeah.

Jon: "But I have to trust that it's not, ultimately. There is actually life here."

Tim:

Yes. Yeah. And when human beings trust and obey the command, what they find is that what looks like death becomes this passageway to the gift of life. And actually in Noah and Abraham's case, not just life for themselves, but then life for all these other people out the other side.

Yeah, so that's great. God's command is pointing you towards life, leads to life—

Jon: But it can feel like death—

Tim: Paradoxically, it can feel confusing and look like a loss of life. Yes, it's good. It's good.

[pause]

Tim:

So what's super fascinating is within the Abraham story, the word "command" is never used.

Jon: Never used?

Tim: Mmhmm. Yeah.

Jon: Wow. None of those times?

Tim: None of those times. However, that son Isaac, the moment Abraham dies and his son Isaac becomes an adult, God appears to Isaac just like he did to Abraham.

And what he says is, "Hey"—this is Genesis 26 verse 3—"I'm going to be with you. I'm going to bless you. I'm going to give you all these lands to you and your seed. I'm gonna establish my oath that I swore to Abraham, your father. I'll give you descendants like the stars of heaven."

And you're like, "Oh, okay. Now the son is inheriting the promise of the father." It's all the same language, all the same words.

"And all the nations on the land are going to be blessed through your seed because..."

You're like, "Whoa! There's a reason? What's the reason?" "Because Abraham listened to my voice."

And you're like, "Oh, okay. Well, that is what God said." God's talking to the guy whose life was spared—

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: On the day that Abraham listened to God's voice. And then, this is Genesis 26:5: "Abraham listened to my voice, and he kept my charge." It's the word mishmeret, which means "keeping." The thing that I gave you to keep—

Jon: Okay.

Tim: He kept it.

Jon: Okay.

Tim:
He kept my commandments—plural. It's the word mitzvah. He kept my statutes. This is the Hebrew word khuqqot, which means literally what is inscribed, like on stone. And he kept my instructions, which is the Hebrew word torah, plural, torot.

Jon:
So we get this portfolio of words here.

Tim: Yeah.

Jon: God didn't ever inscribe anything for Abraham.

Tim:
He didn't inscribe any tablets. It's fascinating.

Jon: Hmm...

Tim: So God is using language here. All of these are going to be the words that Moses will use to describe the commands of—

Jon: God's commands to Israel.

Tim: Of the Torah. And these are the words that David and the poets in the Psalms will use to describe all of God's commands given to Mount Sinai.

What I just want to pay attention to in this moment—

Jon: Yeah.

Tim:A whole bunch of things just came together.

Jon:Okay.

Tim:“Abraham listened to my voice.” That is equivalent to, and then you get these four words, “keeping my charge, my commandments, my statutes, and my torah.” And because Abraham did that, I’m going to now bless all the nations of the earth through the seed of this family.

So it’s actually now, it’s like a Noah moment. Abraham kept the commands.

Jon:Yeah.

Tim:And not even just the commands, the charge and the statutes and the instructions. And that is, he listened to the voice. And when he did that, it led to the preservation of life for himself and his son. And it led to the unleashing of blessing out to the nations.

Jon:Yeah.

Tim:So this third portrait. You had Adam and Eve, Noah and his wife, Abraham and Sarah. This third portrait really—

[sound effect]

Jon:???

Tim:Blew off the top.

[laughter]

Jon:And it’s foreshadowing what Israel’s call is going to be.

Tim:That’s exactly right.

Jon:Okay.

Tim:Yes, that’s right.

So this little line, Genesis 26:5, is crucially important. It’s sort of like he’s the link between the laws given to Israel at Mount Sinai—600 plus—and between the one command given to Adam and Eve and the two commands given to Noah.

Because those were very simple, like, you know, just basically do one thing, you know? And they don’t do it. Adam and Eve don’t do it, it leads to death. Noah does it, leads to life.

Abraham's a little more complicated.

Jon: Yeah.

Tim:

And it's kind of a human drama of family and seed and scarcity and fear and...right?

Jon: Mmhmm.

Tim: But it really humanizes how complicated it actually is to do what God says.

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: But on Abraham's best day, when he trusts God, and when he actually acts on that trust by surrendering his own family's future, what he finds is that keeping the command leads to life.

And then this little summary here in Genesis 26:5 says, that's listening to the voice. And it's...it's as if Abraham kept all the laws of the Torah just by listening to God's voice and doing what he said. And it led to the preservation of life and blessing for the many.

So what God's going to ask Israel to do with the commands of Mount Sinai and why the ten commands that come first are so important is because they're drawing on this whole set of themes developed in the Genesis scroll.

Jon:

Hmm. How do we find life?

Tim: Mmhmm. Yeah.

Jon: And how is God's voice going to bring us to life?

Tim: Yeah.

Jon: And how's it going to help us, especially when what we desire is gonna sometimes lead us to things that are going to lead to death, not life.

Tim: Mmhmm. Mmhmm. Yeah.

So with Adam and Eve, it's a tree that looks good.

Jon: Yeah.

Tim:

But then...well for Noah, it's...there's a cataclysm coming.

Jon:Yeah.

Tim:

And then for Abram, it's, you know, go to this land that I'm going to show you. It's, trust me to provide a family for you and your wife, even though your bodies look like they're done reproducing. So it's all these unlikely things that are hard. You were drawing attention to this earlier—

Jon:Yeah.

Tim:It looks like a kind of surrender or death. But that's...God's command tends to lead people in that direction and then surprises them with life.

Jon:Yeah.

Tim:And that leads us to the next main movement in the story where the word "command" is used. And this is way forward in the story of Israel at Mount Sinai.

Abraham has his son Isaac.

Jon:Yeah.

Tim:Isaac has a son Jacob. Jacob has 12 sons. But God's commands are not really highlighted to these figures. God talks to these people sometimes—

Jon:Tells them what to do?

Tim:And sometimes he tells them what to do. But it's a lot like Abraham. It's, they kind of do it. They don't.

Jon:All right.

Tim:But the word "command" isn't used. The word "command" really comes into prominence once again later on when the twelve sons of Jacob have become a nation. And they get...grow into the nation of Israel.

So let's just take a couple of minutes near the end of this conversation to tee up Mount Sinai and the commands...commands there.

[pause]

Tim:

So the family of Abraham ends up enslaved to the brutal pharaoh in Egypt. That's how the book of Exodus begins, the scroll of Exodus. And famously God raises up Moses. He confronts Egypt. The ten plagues and so on. The people of Israel leave Egypt the night of Passover. God preserves their lives through the desert and brings them to the foot of Mount Sinai.

This is Exodus chapter 19. And when he brings all the people to Mount Sinai, he's going to invite them all into a special covenant partnership, just like God invited Noah. Remember, he said, I'm gonna make a covenant with you.

Jon:Okay.

Tim:

And that was in the context of, make the ark and do what I say, and it will lead to the preservation of life.

Jon:Alright.

Tim:

He invited Abraham to follow his commands, though they weren't ever called commands in the story. We learn later.

Jon:

Except when he talks to Isaac, he calls it a command.

Tim.

That's right. That's right. And he calls it listening to the voice—

Jon:Yeah.

Tim:Abraham listened to the voice, kept my charge and instructions and statutes and commands.

Jon:

Yeah.

Tim:And that was listening to the voice. Now all of Israel is invited to become God's covenant partner. And he leads the nation of Israel to the foot of Mount Sinai. And here we begin Exodus 19. And here's the first thing that God says to the people of Israel when they reach Mount Sinai. This is God's first speech to the people, in Exodus 19 verse 4.

And he says to Moses, "This is what you will say to the house of Jacob. This is what you"—that is, Moses—"you will tell to the sons of Israel: 'You yourselves have seen what I did to the Egyptians. How I bore you or carried you on eagles' wings, and I've brought you to myself.'"

So that's a little summary of chapters 1 through 18 of Exodus.

Jon: Okay. The rescue from slavery.

Tim:

Yep. Yeah. Confronted Egypt. "I carried you like riding on the back of an eagle."

Don't you wish you could do that?

Jon: Mmhm. Yeah.

Tim:

Every time I see an eagle I think—

Jon: Yeah, one day—

Tim:

What if it was big enough?

Jon:

New creation.

Tim: "And I brought you here to myself." That's interesting. So like, God's at this mountain, and he's like, brought...brought them.

Jon:

Okay.

Tim:

"And now, if you will listen, listen to my voice"—it's the Hebrew word shama', listen—

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: And it's the same word used that was used of Abraham, what he did do, and then also of what Adam and Eve didn't do in Genesis.

"If you will listen to my voice, and if you will keep my covenant, then you will be my own special possession among the peoples. Because all of the land belongs to me, but you all will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. These are the words that you are to speak to the sons of Israel."

So this speech introduces what will frame the whole context of the giving of the Ten Commandments and then the hundreds that will follow.

Jon:

Where is Moses when he gets this command from God or gets this set of instructions?

Tim:

The people came to the foot of the mountain—

Jon:Yeah.

Tim:And then Moses was called up.

Jon:Okay.

Tim:So he's up on the mountain hearing these words.

Jon:Okay.

Tim:

Mmhmm. Yeah. He goes up and down the mountain seven times, of course.

Jon:Okay.

Tim:So he has to tell the people—and notice how there's two phrases to describe what Israel is supposed to do. It's...this is set up as, "If you will do this"—

Jon:Uh-huh.

Tim:"Then I will do this," God says. So, "If you will..." And there's two commands given. "If you will listen to my voice," and "If you will keep my covenant."

So what that means is gonna be developed in the story to follow. But we know that listening to the voice means doing what God says, even when it looks like it doesn't lead to life.

Jon:

Even when it looks like it might undo myself.

Tim:Mmhmm. Yeah. Yeah.

What God asked me to do might be intuitive—to do right by God and neighbor and preserve life. But there might be other times where what God says will preserve my or another person's life doesn't look like it will on the surface.

And then that is called keeping my covenant, which is about a formalized partnership. Like God's inviting these people to be his partners. And if they do that, then you will be my special possession among the nations. And then he's like, listen, all of the land belongs to me. So I

could work with a lot of people here. But you are the ones that I've specially chosen to be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.

Now, this is what's interesting, is that remember Noah was called the righteous one, blameless?

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: And he ended up kind of acting like a righteous, mediator, priest figure—

Jon: Yeah.

Tim:
Between God and everybody else.

Jon: Right.

Tim: So what he did was on behalf of all these others. And then in a way what Abraham was doing was on behalf of many others, because through him all the nations will be blessed. So that same logic is being applied here.

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: "If you will listen"—that is, keep my covenant; implied, do what I command—"then you will become a kingdom of priests and a holy nation."

Jon: Yeah. So are these in symmetry then? Listen to my voice; keep my covenant. These are two ways to say the same thing?

Tim: Yes. Listening to God's voice is equivalent to keeping the covenant, which is about—I mean, the simplest analogy to draw on is the marriage covenant.

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: And in most weddings still today, people say some form of vows to each other. And that's what the terms of the covenant are. Vows. And that's what the laws are presented as.

Jon: Okay.

Tim: So the Ten Commandments are sort of like a bullet list under these two phrases right here. Listening to God's voice. Keeping the covenant.

Jon: Okay.

Tim:

How?

Jon: Let me give you ten really concrete examples.

Tim:

Yes. Yeah.

Jon:

The big ten.

Tim:

Mmhmm. The big ten. So what I should—when I hear the Ten Commandments—we're finally to it.

Jon: Okay.

Tim: This is the main point.

Jon:

Yeah, give me the point.

Tim: The Ten Commandments are God's invitation to preserve life. It's like what God commanded Noah or what God commanded Adam and Eve.

How do I know what is the way to both enjoy life, eat from all the trees—

Jon: Yeah. Eat, eat.

Tim: And to preserve my life in the face of danger or death or just confusion? Do what God says. Listen to God's voice. Keep the commands and the charge and the statutes and the instructions.

So the ten commands, it's not about, "Hey, humans, be perfect because God is perfect. And you just, you're supposed to be that way." Or do...it's not an authoritarian move. Like, "Do what I say, because I'm God."

Jon: Okay.

Tim: Like the whole story is saying, do what's—

Jon: Find life.

Tim:

Do what will lead to your own life flourishing. And it just so happens that you're images of God. And so when you do what I say, you will both increase our own partnership and intimacy, and it will be what's good for you and good for all the people around you.

So it's just this reframe. The story gives so much more depth to what the ten commands are.

Jon:
And this is why you like calling them the ten words.

Tim: The ten words, yes.

Jon:
Because it's a reframe.

Tim: Oh, yes. Well, I like—

[laughter]

Tim: Recovering what these ten things are called in the story.

Jon:
Yeah. Yeah. They're called in the story the ten words.

Tim:
The ten words.

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: These are ten words—

Jon:
This is not like an innovation that you're giving us.

Tim: No, no, no.

Yeah, these are ten words of God—

Jon:
Ten words of life.

Tim: That lead to life.

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: Yes.

Jon:

And should I expect that some of these are going to feel very intuitive? “Eat, eat. Yes! I love these.” And some of them, you’re going to stop and go, “Ooh. Actually, this feels like I’m not gonna get what I desire.”

Tim: Yeah.

Jon: And it feels like maybe this will undo me in a way I’m not comfortable with.

Tim: Mmhm. Yeah, yeah. And some on a way that will feel more, yeah, like you said, intuitive than others. In the ancient world, it’s not intuitive to only give your allegiance to one local god.

Jon: Okay. This is command one.

Tim:

It’s command one: have no other gods.

Jon:

Yeah, like, spread it out. Like—

Tim: Yeah. Yeah.

Jon: You know—

Tim:

What do you say? Hedge your bets?

Jon:

Hedge your bets. Yeah—

Tim: Diversify your—

Jon: I can sacrifice to Yahweh, and I can make some side bets here.

Tim: Right. Diversify your portfolio.

Jon: Your portfolio.

Tim:

You know.

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: Become friends of many gods.

Jon: Yeah, don't put it all on black.

Tim: Yeah. There you go. So that's one. That would be counterintuitive in ancient context. For moderns, that's... has a little less punch to it.

Rest. Right? Keep the Sabbath.

Jon:
Hmm... yeah, that's very counterintuitive.

Tim:
Yeah. Maximizing profit is not, apparently not the greatest value. It shouldn't be.

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: And maximizing productivity and profit shouldn't necessarily be the greatest value but rather a balance of work and rest. And then, I guess the other ones. Don't desire what belongs to other people.

Jon:
Yeah.

Tim: I mean, I don't know—

Jon: It's a deep well.

Tim:
Yeah. Yeah, it depends. You know, don't kill. So much depends on your social location. You know, we live in a Western, modern Western culture that's been so saturated in, right, the Christian tradition that this general idea of preserving life is one of the highest values. It's baked in, you know, to our culture and our law tradition. But then also a glorification of violence is baked into the roots of Western culture too.

Jon: Yeah.

Tim:
And that's at odds with "thou shall not kill." So I guess it depends what feels intuitive for my own flourishing maybe depends on where and when you grew up.

Jon:I think all of these we'll probably discover, there's a lot of very intuitive things. It's like, yes, that's what I want. But then you're gonna start to wrestle with it and go, "Well, actually, I guess I want some other things too, this is coming into conflict with"—

Tim:Yeah, yeah.

Jon:"And what will I decide to do?"

Tim:

Yeah. But the main point is that God's commands are instructions for the preservation and flourishing of life for myself and for those around me. That is the ultimate goal. And it's the foundation. That is what the Ten Commandments are about. And even when they don't look like a clear, simple pathway to the good life, that is what they are in the biblical story.

Jon:Okay. The pathway to the good life.

Tim:Yeah. Pathway to the good life.

So, yeah, what we're gonna do now then really is I think we should dive into the commands.

Jon:

Let's read the Ten.

Tim:Yeah. We're going to work through the Ten. And we're gonna look next, first of all, just at the overall literary packaging of the Ten.

Jon:Okay.

Tim:See how they're bundled together. It's pretty cool.

Jon:Okay.

Tim:

And then we're just going to dive into the first two, which are kind of a bundle. And so we'll actually take a couple of conversations to tease apart the first two. But here we go. You ready?

Jon:Yeah.

Tim:

Let's...let's rock the Ten Commandments.

Jon:Let's do it.

Tim:Let's do it next.

Jon: Thanks for listening to this episode of BibleProject Podcast.

Next week, we're gonna start reading the Ten Commandments, starting with the first command: "There will not be for you any other Elohim before me."

Tim:

Any other spiritual being other than Yahweh is not worthy of your ultimate loyalty and allegiance.

Jon:

Okay.

Tim:

And when humans give our imaginations and desires and allegiances to anything that's not the source of all reality, it will eventually lead us on a path that dehumanizes us and other people.

Jon: BibleProject is a crowdfunded nonprofit, and we exist to help people experience the Bible as a unified story that leads to Jesus. And everything that we make is free because of the generous support of thousands of people just like you.

Thank you so much for being a part of this with us.