

Stories From The Stable *Christmas Series*

Exodus 20, Numbers 7, Isaiah 65

Written By

©Pastor Marty Baker

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Do you love *Scrabble*? I do. I've played it since childhood, and when it became available on my trusty iPad I wasted no time installing it. Now, I play probably four to five games (or more) every day. In fact, when I get up on Sunday mornings to go over my sermon, I get the mental juices flowing by playing a couple of games. As you know, being able to come up with two letter words can mean the difference between, well, winning and losing. Here is a matrix of some of my favorite ones:

Ai	Ar	Ae	Ai	Ax	Bi	Ef	Em	Ex	Fa
Fe	Gi	Hm	jo	Ka	Ki	ky	Mm	Mu	Ne
Oe	Pe	Qi	Re	Sh	Ut	Xi	Xu	Ya	Za

Of course, if you happen to be able to utilize a triple letter score with a Qi or a Za, it will push you forward in a big fashion.

If you want to really dive deep and hone your competitive edge, I'd suggest checking out *The Phrontistery* web site (<http://phrontistery.info/scrabble3.html>). This word comes from the Greek *phrontisterion*, or a thinking place. Go here to discover more two letter words, plus unique and helpful three letter words.

Now, of the two letter words I've presented, which is no way exhaustive, I have purposefully omitted, until now, a key two letter combination: ox. I especially love this combo when I get either the "x" to fall on a triple letter score, or to be part of a word which falls on the

coveted triple word score. Talk about a great way to pump up your score. I also love this word because of its theological import for Christmas. I'm sure you will remember I've told you many times you can extract theological meaning from just about anything, even *Scrabble*. Yes, playing this competitive word game can be a spiritual experience.

This observation about the relationship between the word "ox" and Christmas is worth studying further. Why? For one, if cattle were present as suggested by the carol *Away in a Manger*, then we can probably conclude, knowing the importance of the ox in ancient Israel, there was most likely one or two in the stable the evening of Christ's glorious birth. Two, knowing how God, at times in history, has utilized various animals to accomplish His kingdom/redemptive purposes (consider the various animals used in the messianic prophecies of Daniel chapters 7 and 8, plus the divinely chosen little donkey Jesus used to ride into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, Matthew 21:2, 5, 7), it stands to reason, from the importance of a simple ox in the Law and the Prophets, there is much to learn here this holy season.

Come with me, then, as we get up close and personal not just with a great word to spell in *Scrabble*, but with an animal which can teach us much about the Messiah, Jesus. We'll begin as we customarily do by posing our logical question.

What Do We Learn From The Ox? (Selected Texts)

Oxen appear throughout the Patriarchal narrative to substantiate the fact God blessed Abraham as He had promised in the unconditional Abrahamic Covenant (Genesis 12:16; 20:14; 21:27). Hence, their presence in his life clearly demonstrate that God is true to His word. But there is much more meaning we can extract from the presence of this bovine, as we shall see. After reading through all the usage of the word "ox" in the Old Testament, I have isolated three pivotal passage which serve to teach us much this Christmas. Two are found buried in the Torah, or the Law, and one is located at the end of a chapter in Isaiah, which just happens to be one of the greatest messianic works among the Prophets, or the *Naviim* (נְבִיאִים).

Our first point of instructive light comes from Exodus.

Answers From Exodus 20

In Exodus 20 starting with verse 7, we have the famous Ten Commandments.

⁷ You shall not take the name of the LORD your God in vain, for the LORD will not leave him unpunished who takes His name in vain. ⁸ Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. ⁹ Six days you shall labor and do all your work, ¹⁰ but the seventh day is a Sabbath of the LORD your God; *in it* you shall not do any work, you or your son or your daughter, your male or your female servant or your cattle or your sojourner who stays with you. ¹¹ For in six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth, the sea and all that is in them, and rested on the seventh day; therefore, the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy. ¹² Honor your father and your mother, that your days may be prolonged in the land which the LORD your God gives you. ¹³ You shall not murder. ¹⁴ You shall not commit adultery. ¹⁵

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You shall not steal. ¹⁶You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.
(Exodus 20:7-16).

No greater laws were ever given to mankind.

Structurally, we know the first three deal with man's relationship with and toward God, while the last seven concern man's relationship with others. The point here is well-taken. If this first relationship is right and God is first and foremost in one's life, then it will be easier for this person to fulfill the other seven. The reverse is true, as well. If God is not first, then there's a pretty good chance, the other six commands will not be fully realized.

In addition, we also structurally know that while these ten commands, denoted by the emphatic placement of the Hebrew word *lo*, or no (לא), at the head of some of the sentences, possess an individual imperative value, they also serve as ten categories of commandments. God definitely expands on these categories in Deuteronomy where we, coupled with His words in Exodus, encounter 613 explicit expansions of these important areas of life and living. As a side note, these commands are never called the Ten Commandments in the Hebrew Torah, but the *Aseret ha-D'varim* (עֲשֶׂרֶת הַדְּבָרִים) or the Ten Statements or Ten Declarations (Exodus 34:28; Deuteronomy 4:13; 10:4).

All of this expansion, of course, helps us understand one of the many purposes of the Law. In his insightful article in *Bibliotheca Sacra* titled *The Purpose of the Law*, Dr. J. Dwight Pentecost details the ten divine purposes of the Law:

1. The Law was given to reveal the holiness of God.
2. The Law served to expose the sinfulness of man. Truly, if the Law was not given, man would not know what is morally and spiritually true or false, nor whether he lived as God desired or not.
3. The Law revealed the lofty standard of holiness required by a perfectly holy God.
4. The Law was, according to Paul, man's schoolmaster (Galatians 3:24) insofar as it pointed and prepared him to see the need for embracing the Messiah who could fulfill the Law.
5. The Law served to form Israel, God's chosen messianic people, into a people or a nation (Exodus 19:5-8). Yes, it made this a unique, special people.
6. The Law, by definition, separated Israel from the nations that they might become priests unto the true and living God (Exodus 31:13).
7. The Law provided the means whereby sinful people could secure divinely appointed provision for forgiveness of sins and restoration to divine fellowship



Figure:

https://www.bing.com/images/search?view=detailV2&ccid=%2bTEMXazB&id=3FEA5E47F9378171AEAA874AF2FDC46C558A1BD4&thid=OIP.-TEMXazBVSs_QVbOwJDzrAEsDR&mediaurl=http%3a%2f%2fdoggies.com%2fblog%2fwp-content%2fuploads%2f2008%2f06%2f10-commandments.jpg&exp=558&expw=800&q=ten+commandments&simid=608049976695587719&selectedIndex=13&ajaxhist=0

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- (Leviticus 1-7 describe the five key offerings given by God to man for these purposes).
8. The Law provided the vehicle by which Israel new how to worship God through various religious feasts (Leviticus 23).
 9. The Law provided a test whether one was in God's kingdom/theocracy or not (Deuteronomy 28)
 10. The Law, as we learn from the New Testament, clearly prepared the nation for the coming of the promised Messiah.¹

How did the Law point to Jesus? It did so by demonstrating man's utter inability to fulfill, on a *perpetual* basis, all of the various commands because of his Adamic sin nature. This motif and reality is clearly brought out in the last, or tenth, commandment.

¹⁷ You shall not covet your neighbor's house; you shall not covet your neighbor's wife or his male servant or his female servant or his ox or his donkey or anything that belongs to your neighbor.

Ah, there it is, the ox. How interesting this beautiful bovine appears in the tenth commandment.

Of all the commandments, this one is highly internal, thereby making it difficult to keep consistently. A person could live in such an external fashion they could appear to have fulfilled the first nine; however, internally they would be hard pressed to fulfill this particular command because the internal desire to covet something external is hardwired into our sinful Adamic nature. We have thousands of laws on our books, but nothing quite like this, and this is how you know these laws are from God. He forbids the inner craving and desire to have what is not ours, but which belongs to another, whether it is someone's new home in Fairfax Station, his lovely wife, or his new whatever. Desire, in and of itself, is not wrong, as Paul says in 1 Timothy 3:1 where he employs the same Greek word, *epithumeo* (*ἐπιθυμέω*) which is used for the Hebrew "to covet" in the LXX, when he says, "if any man aspires to the office of an overseer, he desire [epithumeo] a good work." What is wrong is desiring or coveting after a forbidden object, or so desiring something/someone you will do most anything to get it.

Based on this level of divine measurement of holy versus unholy behavior, it is virtually impossible for any given person to fulfill all of the law perpetually. Why? The reason is simple: just when a person has nailed down one or two laws, the inner desire to have a forbidden object trips them up. As James argues in chapter 2, "For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles in one point, he has become guilty of all" (James 2). Hence, just when you were quite happy with just throwing your seed on your land to hopefully get a decent crop, your neighbor shows us with brand-spanking new, state-of-the-art ox from the local farm animal market. Immediately, even though you don't have the cash, you start desiring what he has, especially as you see how easily he ploughs his field.

Jesus ran into this tenth commandment when a young, wealthy man approached him one day with a question about how to get into heaven:

¹J. Dwight Pentecost, "The Purpose of the Law," *Bibliotheca Sacra* (July 1971): 227-233.

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¹⁸ And a certain ruler questioned Him, saying, "Good Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?" ¹⁹ And Jesus said to him, "Why do you call Me good? No one is good except God alone."²⁰ "You know the commandments, 'Do not commit adultery, Do not murder, Do not steal, Do not bear false witness, Honor your father and mother.'" ²¹ And he said, "All these things I have kept from *my* youth." ²² And when Jesus heard *this*, He said to him, "One thing you still lack; sell all that you possess, and distribute it to the poor, and you shall have treasure in heaven; and come, follow Me." ²³ But when he had heard these things, he became very sad; for he was extremely rich (Luke 18).

The man said he had kept the seventh, sixth, eighth, ninth, and fifth commandments; however, in reality, as Jesus points out, he had failed to keep the tenth commandment because coveting and greed were continual issues for him. To put it another way, the rich investor had an issue with an ox.

All of this, of course, quite naturally points to Jesus, the perfect God-man, who came to earth to fulfill the Law completely (Romans 3:20; Galatians 2:21; 3:21). This is the implication of Christ's words to the rich man. Obedience to the law will not allow one to gain entrance into heaven because sinful man cannot possibly perfectly and persistently obey the Law. The only option for kingdom entrance is for one, like the rich man, to follow Jesus because only He was and is capable of living a sinless life. Yes, only Jesus could fulfill the first nine commandments throughout His entire life, and only He could so control His inner desires that He would NEVER desire that which is prohibited.

The Law called for sinless perfection and only Jesus could live in this fashion as the second Adam. He challenged enemies to point out His sin, but he failed to do so (John 8:46). On numerous occasions they attempted to trap Him in order to trip Him but, but they failed (Matthew 22:15). He boldly claimed in John that He always did what the heavenly Father wanted from Him (John 8:29). Also in John He claimed, and rightly so, that He obeyed the heavenly Father's commandments (John 15:10). He went so far as to say that He had not come to abolish the Law, but to fulfill every part of it, even the difficult parts like the tenth commandment (Matthew 5:17-18).

Christ's followers also verified His holy life. Paul, later, said that Jesus "knew no sin" (2 Corinthians 5:2). Peter, who walked with Jesus daily, also remarked that Jesus never committed sin nor did they ever find deceit in His conversational life (1 Peter 2:22). John, who also knew Jesus well, said he never saw sin in the life of Jesus (1 John 3:5). That is quite a claim. Let someone hang around you for just a month and see if anyone can make this statement about you. The fact that John made it was based on daily observing the life of the Lord. Ostensibly, the conclusion is clear: Jesus was the sacrificial lamb of God who had no moral or spiritual spot, which, in turn, made Him the only candidate to die for the sin of sinners (1 Peter 1:19). Jesus, as the author of Hebrews says so clearly, "appeared to put away sin by the sacrifice of Himself" (Hebrews 10:26).

No wonder, then, an ox was most likely present in the stable that starry night in the foothills of Israel. Had that ox been able to speak, I can imagine him saying something like, "Wow, I was privileged to see the birth of the One who was able to fulfill all of the commandments of God, even the tenth one dealing with greed and covetousness. No wonder He was called the Son

of God and the Savior for only He would go on to live a life of complete holiness so He could, in turn, be the perfect sacrifice for sinners.”

A second message arises naturally from an interesting chapter in the book of Numbers.

Answers from Numbers 7

First, we'll read this interesting and informative text, and then we'll make some salient observations:

¹Now it came about on the day that Moses had finished setting up the tabernacle, he anointed it and consecrated it with all its furnishings and the altar and all its utensils; he anointed them and consecrated them also. ²Then the leaders of Israel, the heads of their fathers' households, made an offering (they were the leaders of the tribes; they were the ones who were over the numbered men). ³When they brought their offering before the LORD, six covered carts and twelve oxen, a cart for every two of the leaders and an ox for each one, then they presented them before the tabernacle. ⁴Then the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, ⁵"Accept *these things* from them, that they may be used in the service of the tent of meeting, and you shall give them to the Levites, to each man according to his service." ⁶So Moses took the carts and the oxen, and gave them to the Levites. ⁷Two carts and four oxen he gave to the sons of Gershon, according to their service, ⁸and four carts and eight oxen he gave to the sons of Merari, according to their service, under the direction of Ithamar the son of Aaron the priest (Numbers 7).

Just after the Israelites finished constructing their portable worship center, called the Tabernacle, the leaders of the tribes brought expensive gifts to the Lord. Pay close attention to what they brought: “six covered carts and twelve oxen, a cart for every two of the leaders and an ox for each one” (v. 3). Six covered carts cost them a good deal of money, and giving twelve oxen to God was a sizeable gift as well. Concerning the importance of oxen, we read in Proverbs 14:4: “Where no oxen are, the manger is clean, but much increase comes by the strength of the ox.” The ox to Israel was like a John Deer tractor. And I don't know if you've checked tractors out lately, but some of the big commercial boys can go for around \$200,000. My point, in light of this, is simple. Six fine carts and twelve oxen as gifts to God was some kind of gift. Makes you, as a sidelight, stop and ask yourself, “Do I give magnanimously and sacrificially to God.” How do you know when you are giving at this level? When it interrupts your lifestyle. Anyway, back to the text.



Who were the carts and oxen for? First and foremost, they were for God. Pragmatically, they were for the Levites, or the priests who were responsible for the moving and operation of the Tabernacle of God. Why did they need them? They had a lot to move, didn't they? Yes, and who moved what? Well, the priests were divided into three courses: the Gershonites, the Merarites, and the Kohathites. The Gershonites had to move the massive four coverings of the Tabernacle, consisting of the linen, goat, ram, and badger. Just the goat covering was 45 feet wide and 66 feet long. Imagine the weight. The badger covering was 6,000 square feet, and was composed of between 1,000 and 1,500 skins sewn together. Again, imagine the weight. They also had to transport the screen of the doorway, the various hangings of the court, and the altar, which was 7 ½ feet square, by 4 ½ feet high and was bronze. Can you say, heavy? The Merarites, had to move all of the forty-eight wooden frames of the tabernacle. Each board was twenty-seven inches wide and eighteen inches thick with GOLD OVERLAY. They also had to move the heavy bars which held all of this together, not to mention the 6,600 pounds of silver used to make the sockets, equipment, pegs and cords, and sixty perimeter pillars, which were 7 ½ feet high and also weigh quite a bit. The Kohathites had to move the ark, the table of showbread, the lampstand, the incense altar, the utensils, and the screen.

Since all of the heavy items went to the Gershonites and the Merarites, they received the appropriate carts and oxen from Moses. The Merarites received four carts and eight oxen because they were responsible for doing the heaviest lifting of anyone. The Gershonites came in second with two carts and four oxen. The Kohathites had to basically carry what they had, but the objects weren't that large so they could do it with relative ease.

What, you ask, has this obscure passage got to do with Jesus and Christmas. First, He was and is THE PRIEST of all priests. His priesthood, as the author of Hebrews argues, is far grander than that of the Levites because His priesthood is of the line of Melchizedek, who for all intents and purposes, has an eternal priesthood, which pre-dated that of Aaron (Hebrews 5-7). Second, Jesus was a servant above all things. Concerning this facet of His life we read in Mark:

⁴⁵ For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many (Mark 10).

He came to serve us and serve He did.

- He actually took the time to answer those who spoke evil of him (Mark 3:20-30).
- He calmed the raging Galilean sea when the disciples thought the boat was sinking (Mark 4:35-41).
- He took the time to free a demon possessed man when the man approached him near some spooky tombs in the hill country of the Gadarenes on the southeast shore of the Galilee (Mark 5).
- He healed a lady who had a bleeding issue twelve straight years (Mark 5:25-31).
- He miraculously fed 5,000 hungry worshippers in the of nowhere (Mark 6:30-44).

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- He served all of us the day He carried the splintery and heavy wooden cross up the hill called Calvary (Mark 15).

To study Christ's life is to see just how a true servant of God obeys.

- They serve even if they are tired.
- They serve even if they are maligned.
- They serve even if it is not in the limelight.
- They serve even if they are wronged.
- They serve even if they are misunderstood.
- They serve voluntarily, meaning they don't have to be prodded to serve.
- They serve even if they are obscure.
- They serve by meeting the needs of others.
- They serve by living sacrificially.

All of this describes Jesus to a tee, and Mark 10:45 rightly appears in the book of Mark because historically this gospel has been equated with the ox, which denotes service. Matthew is graphically associated, according to J. Sidlow Baxter, with the lion because it pictures Jesus as the lion from the tribe of Judah, the true messianic king of Israel.² Luke is equated with Jesus as a man, or the Son of man, who came to empathize with us and to live for us like no other man could. John pictures Jesus as the eagle, which, in turn, speaks of His deity. This is an apt description of Jesus in John, for John waxes eloquent from the first verse concerning the divine identity of Jesus (John 1:1). But for our purposes, we zero our sights in on Mark because here is where the ox comes into providential play.

Again, I say, no wonder an ox would have been in the presence of the baby of Bethlehem. If he could have spoken, I think he would have said, "I saw laying in the manger the Servant of all servants, the One who would do more work than my family line has or ever will do. Yes, I got to see the One who would serve mankind all the days of his life, and who would at the end of His life serve sinners by paying the penalty for their sin. I also got to see the One whose body was the tabernacle to end all tabernacles because His body was His the Temple" (Matthew 12:6; Mark 4:58).

This picture of Jesus as the Servant leads us to two practical yet profound questions

- What is keeping you from embracing, by faith, this Savior who served you well by dying for your sin so you might be saved?
- If you are His child by faith, a second question is in order: Just as the oxen and the priests did what they could do to serve God, what are you doing to follow in their footsteps? Are you a soaker or a server? If you belong to Him, then service to others and service to the local body of Christ is your

²J. Sidlow Baxter, *Explore the Book* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1960), 120.

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calling. So, might your request be that of Isaiah, “Here am I. Send me!” (Isaiah 6).

And while you are thinking about service to God, remember that even the highest order of angels, the cherubim, live for service. In fact, all the graphic theological motifs which describe the four gospels, are reflected in their heads, which are composed of four faces.

¹⁰ Their faces looked like this: Each of the four had the face of a human being, and on the right side each had the face of a lion, and on the left the face of an ox; each also had the face of an eagle. (Ezekiel 1).

Amazing. Not only do they serve God day and day out, one of their faces is that of the ultimate serving beast, the ox. How fitting. Might our lives and our faces this Christmas and beyond reflect to all around us that we are nothing but servants of the living God.