

The Open Pit, the Open Tomb

Exodus 21:33–36, Luke 24:1–12

In the providence of God we come this morning to the law regarding an open pit. The word *pit* is a common word. It can also mean *well* (such as a water well), *fountain*, or even *dungeon*.

There is a bit of irony in the story of Joseph in Genesis. Joseph's brothers, insane with jealousy, threw him into a *pit*—there's that word. It was a dry well, deep enough that he could not escape. Later, Joseph's brothers sold him to slave-traders, who took him to Egypt to be sold at a slave auction. The man who purchased him realized he was honest and hard-working, and put him in charge of all his possessions. Unjustly accused, he was thrown into prison. Later, he remarked to a fellow prisoner, "I was stolen away out of the land of the Hebrews: and here also have I done nothing that they should put me into the *dungeon*"¹—literally, the *pit*. So here was Joseph, dragged up out of a pit in the Promised Land, then thrown into another pit in Egypt—the deepest part of the prison. But God had not forgotten him, and he was destined for greatness. It would be God's doing. Joseph's story is the story of the whole Bible. It's the story of glory through suffering, exaltation through humiliation, the cross and the crown.² That's the way God works.

Let's look at our text. I have three points this morning: (1) Workplace safety, (2) Equitable amends, (3) True protection; first,

1. Workplace safety

We read: "And if a man opens a pit, or if a man digs a pit and does not cover it, and an ox or a donkey falls in it, the owner of the pit shall make it good; he shall give money to their owner, but the dead animal shall be his."

God has made us to be stewards of his earth. As stewards, we are to live lives of obedience to his law and manage the world according to the teachings of his Word. At the beginning God told man, "Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it." This is what we call the Dominion Mandate. Man is to subdue the earth and develop civilization to the glory of God.

Long ago the sufferer Job spoke of the mineral wealth that God put into the world: "Surely there is a mine for silver, and a place where gold is refined. Iron is taken from the earth, and copper is smelted from ore."³ At this early stage of history men were digging pits in hopes of finding silver, gold, iron and copper. In the book of Exodus we are told that the breastplate worn by Israel's high priest was to be decorated with precious stones: sardius, topaz, carbuncle; emerald, sapphire,

¹ Gen. 40:15

² <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/what-joseph-story-really-about/> accessed 4-18-25

³ Job 28:1–2, 6

diamond; jacinth, agate, amethyst; beryl, onyx, jasper. Amazingly, these precious stones were known to a recently-liberated slave people! Our bountiful God has put lots of mineral wealth into our beautiful world, but man must dig to get it.

Developing the raw materials and resources of the earth, according to the Dominion Mandate, glorifies God. Digging water wells, gravel pits, mining, and so forth, are legitimate pursuits, but safety to humans and other living creatures must be considered. It is the responsibility of the landowner or leaseholder to operate his business so as not to endanger life or limb. This is a universal responsibility. We are all—every one of us—to assume responsibility for our own actions.

Godly mothers and fathers teach their children to clean up after themselves. It does not do a child good to always go around cleaning up after him. God made us in his image, and part of being in his image is to assume responsibility for our own actions. When we make a mess, we clean it up. We don't leave it for the next guy to clean up. When we cause an offense, we own up to it. We don't run away and hope no one finds out. We may be able to run away from *man*, but we can't run away from *God*. We may be able to hide what we've done from our fellow-man, but we can't hide it from God. He knows our works, our thoughts, our motives—perfectly.

So if our business is digging, God holds us responsible to take care that innocent creatures—people, surely, but even animals—are not inadvertently harmed by the holes we've dug. If small, they are to be covered up. If large, they should be fenced, to keep unsuspecting individuals—including children—from falling in and hurting themselves. Our text specifically mentions the ox and the donkey. In Bible times, oxen were used for heavy work, plowing or pulling, and donkeys were used for transport—think of Mary, riding a donkey on the dusty road to Bethlehem. If these animals were to fall into a pit and be harmed, then it would immediately affect their owners' ability to earn their living and feed their families. The bottom line: people who dig holes accept responsibility to ensure the safety of their workplace.

Since God has written his moral law on human hearts, the laws of Western societies reflect this, but God has graciously codified this law in the Book of the Covenant to remind people of their duty.

One of my cousins—we used to play together at family reunions when we were little—started an excavating business. He had big, heavy equipment and dug basements and foundations for commercial buildings. He also graded surfaces for parking lots and did other site preparation. He had quite a few employees and did very well. His work was in high demand. Part of his job was complying with safety regulations in the various cities and townships where he worked. He had to install fencing around worksites. The gates had to be locked when the workers went home

at night. Bystanders might peer through the fence to watch the progress of the work, but they could not freely wander around the job site.

About twenty-five years ago, new sewer lines were installed in our neighborhood. The sewer in front of our house was put in at a depth of twelve feet or more. The contractors put in steel trench boxes, which allowed workers to work safely underground without the danger of the trench walls caving in on them. When they finished one section, they hoisted up the trench box and moved it down to the next section. Care was taken to provide a safe working environment for the workers. Before the workers went home at night, they filled in the trench to minimize risk to people who might be walking about at night.

God gave us a beautiful world, but there are risks wherever one lives—risk of falls, drowning, wild animals, storms, falling limbs, and so forth. This world is a dangerous place. “Through many *dangers*, toils, and snares, I have already come; ’tis grace has brought me safe thus far, and grace will lead me home.”

Our Lord Jesus came into this world, which has become a more dangerous place on account of the fall. He came here, fully cognizant of the danger. He came to deliver us from danger and usher us into the peace and safety of his eternal presence. He did this purely out of love. “God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son.” Christ died for our sins, he was buried, and he rose again the third day. That is the Good news—the good news of what God has done.

Our text speaks of opening a pit, or digging a pit and not covering it. That is a potential benefit, but it is also a danger. David, the sweet singer of Israel, sings of this danger in Psalm 40: “I waited patiently for the LORD; and He inclined to me, and heard my cry. He also brought me up out of a *horrible pit*, out of the miry clay, and set my feet upon a rock, and established my steps.” Calvin explains: “here is an allusion to the deep gulfs, where the waters gush with a tumultuous force. By this similitude he shows that he was placed in as imminent peril of death as if he had been cast into a deep *pit*, roaring with the impetuous rage of waters.”⁴ David was a sensitive musician and gifted leader. His Psalm 23 speaks of “green pastures” and “still waters”—a picture of peace. But his life was not always peaceful. His Psalm 40 speaks of a *horrible* pit—no peace there! Perhaps he was thinking of the time when he was being chased by Saul’s armies—or by his very own son, trying to take his throne from him. Or maybe he was thinking of the thoughts of hell and destruction that tormented him in the middle of the night. When we are tormented by our conscience and come to see that we cannot save ourselves, we, like David and the Old Testament saints, need to turn to Christ, who delivers us from the torment of the Devil and the fear of everlasting punishment, and gives us his peace which passes understanding. Such peace is found only in the

⁴ John Calvin, commentary on the Psalms at Psalm 40 (Logos Bible Software)

Cross. The Lord Jesus Christ in love took our torment upon himself. He went into the horrible pit of despair on the cross, tormented by the devil and the demons of hell who prematurely concluded that they had succeeded in destroying the Son of God and would never have to deal with him again. But they underestimated him who said, “Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up”—speaking of the temple of his body.⁵

2. Equitable amends

Look with me at the amends that are prescribed in our text: if an ox or donkey falls into an uncovered pit and is killed, “the owner of the pit shall make it good; he shall give money” to the animal’s owner, and “the dead animal shall be his.” Double restitution is not owed, since there had been no criminal intent, but rather “simple compensation”—the market value of the animal.

If one man’s ox kills another man’s ox, the live ox is to be sold and the proceeds divided between the owners; the dead ox also is divided. The dead animal cannot be eaten for food, since it had not been slaughtered but died by itself (cf. Deut. 14:21); nevertheless the carcass would be valuable for its hide. Shoes, anyone?

If it had been known that the ox was vicious, and the owner had not kept it confined as required by law, then he pays the owner of the dead animal for the value of his ox, and the dead animal becomes his.

In each case the law gives equitable amends for the damage that had been sustained. In each case the person who was negligent compensates the person whom he had harmed. The case is closed, and the two parties can be reconciled. There are no loose ends—no unfinished business, no bitterness, no resentment. They can live as neighbors again, and get on with their lives.

Biblical law promotes a just society. There is no taking advantage of the weak. There is no “might makes right.” The rich do not rule over the poor. There is no favoritism. Justice is blind, and the party that suffered the loss—no matter his station in society—is compensated. We live in a fallen world where hoped-for events do not always go perfectly. There are sure to be calamities, disappointments, troubles, loss. But the Christian knows that God is sovereign. Trials, setbacks and difficulties will surely happen. But we know one thing for certain: there is a God in heaven, and “*all* things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are the called according to His purpose.”⁶ “No good thing will He withhold from those who walk uprightly.”⁷ God “will turn to my good whatever adversity he sends upon me in this vale of tears. He is *able* to do this because he is almighty God; he *desires* to do this because he is a faithful Father.”⁸ The Good Shepherd is

⁵ John 2:19–21

⁶ Rom. 8:28

⁷ Ps. 84:11

⁸ Heidelberg Catechism Lord’s Day 9, *Trinity Psalter Hymnal*, 876 (emphasis added)

on the throne, and his sheep can rest secure. “He that keepeth Israel shall neither slumber nor sleep.”⁹ My heavenly Father is on the throne; why should I torment myself with worry? Christian, your God is a God of perfect justice!

We have considered workplace safety and equitable amends. Thirdly, consider

3. True protection

At the end of Luke 23 we read of a man named Joseph of Arimathea who, after Jesus had breathed his last, “went to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus. Then he took it down, wrapped it in linen, and laid it in a tomb that was hewn out of the rock, where no one had ever lain before” (Luke 23:52–53). The word for *tomb* in the original Greek signifies a place of remembrance. When a loved one dies, the family lovingly lays the body to rest. It is buried in a cemetery, and a gravestone is erected over the grave to memorialize the name of the deceased. In the case of Jesus, the text specifies that the tomb was hewn out of rock. It was a new tomb; no one had ever been laid there before. In the providence of God it was the perfect place for the body of Jesus. No other body had ever been put there before; thus, there could be no case of mistaken identity. Furthermore, the tomb had been cut out of solid rock, so no one could have easily tunneled in from the other side to remove the body. There was only one way in—through the front door. There was a huge stone rolled in front of the door. Moreover, Jesus’ enemies had convinced Pilate to place soldiers in front of the tomb, to guard it. If Jesus had been an ordinary human being and not the Son of God from heaven, his body would have lain in the tomb from its burial Friday until Monday morning. His enemies—but ironically not his followers—had remembered that he had said he would rise again after three days.¹⁰ So if Jesus had been just an ordinary human, on Monday morning the guard would have reported to Pilate that they had done their duty, that they had kept continuous watch over the tomb, and the stone was still in place covering the door, and that the corpse that had been laid inside was still there. Jesus would have been legally shown to be just a man—*not* the Son of God—and that would have been the end of it. There would have been no resurrection and no Christian religion. Jesus would have been merely a footnote in world history—a good man with a lot of interesting ideas, but not God in human flesh.

But after Jesus’ burial comes the resurrection, and that changes everything. Luke, a competent historian who had examined all the early accounts of Jesus, reports that on the first day of the week, very early in the morning, some women came to the tomb bringing spices which they had prepared to anoint the body. They did this out of love for Jesus, and out of sorrow that his life had been cut short and he had been killed. But when they got to the tomb they found the stone rolled away from the door—remember, the tomb cut out of solid rock. Since the stone had been

⁹ Ps. 121:4

¹⁰ Matt. 27:63

rolled away, and Pilate's Roman guard had fled, the women went in and did not find the body of the Lord Jesus. The text reports that they were greatly perplexed about this. While they wondered, two men stood by them in shining garments. These are angels sent from heaven. Then, as they were afraid and bowed their faces to the earth, the angels said to them, "Why do you seek the living among the dead? He is not here, but is risen! Remember how He spoke to you when He was still in Galilee, saying, 'The Son of Man must be delivered into the hands of sinful men, and be crucified, and the third day rise again.'" Then the women remembered their Lord's words. They returned from the tomb and told all these things to the eleven apostles and to the others. Luke records that it was Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the other women with them, who told these things to the apostles. Their words seemed to them like fantasy, and the apostles did not believe them. But Peter arose and ran to the tomb; and stooping down, he saw the linen cloths lying by themselves; and he departed, marveling to himself at what had happened.

Remember, Jesus' tomb is a *pit*—a cavity cut into the earth out of solid rock. In the Old Testament law we studied this morning, an ox or donkey—or, heaven forbid, an unsuspecting adult or child—might fall into that pit, so it is the responsibility of the person tending the pit to cover it, or otherwise secure it, so that it does not threaten life or limb.

In the case of Jesus, however, his dead, lifeless body had been lovingly and purposely laid to rest in a pit of the earth to memorialize him and to await the resurrection at the last day. Jesus' disciples—all of them, the eleven apostles, and the other men and women—were heartbroken, convinced that Jesus had died like every other mortal, and that was the end of his story. But the disciples were mistaken. They needed to understand the significance of the angels's message: "He is not here, but is risen!" For indeed, Jesus has risen from the dead, never to die! For forty days he was seen by witnesses—preachers of the Gospel who were commissioned to tell his story to the nations. Make no mistake! We serve a *risen* Savior! As the New Testament records, he ascended up to heaven. He sits at the right-hand of the Father. He ever lives to make intercession for the saints.

Note the contrast: As our Old Testament text this morning teaches, the owner of a pit cannot escape responsibility to cover his pit in order to protect innocent life. The open pit is a *danger* that an unsuspecting population must be protected from. But in the Gospels, the open tomb is the *safety* and *salvation* of God's people! Here is the Good News, the message of life that needs to be proclaimed to the whole world. There are now, it is thought, more than seven *billion* men, women and children in this world, and every one of them needs to hear about the resurrection of Christ. This is the most consequential news a person could ever hear. If Jesus rose from the dead, then his Gospel must be reckoned with. We are all sinners, lost

and on our way to hell, but if we repent of our sins and put our trust in Jesus, the Lord of heaven and earth, we are translated from death to life. Our sins are forgiven, and we are his—forever!

On October 14, 1987 a little 18-month-old girl named Jessica McClure, known to the world as “Baby Jessica,” was playing in her aunt’s backyard in Midland, Texas, when she fell into a deep 8-inch shaft that was uncovered. Her body got stuck in the shaft, over 20 feet below ground. There she would remain without food and water for nearly 60 hours. People everywhere were glued to their TVs as news outlets highlighted desperate efforts by rescuers to save her life. Well-drillers drilled a parallel well next to the abandoned well where she was stuck, then drilled a horizontal cross-tunnel just below her. A rescuer was able to shimmy in under her, pull her out, and hand her to another man, who lifted her out of the earth. The little girl is grown now, married, with two children. She told *People* magazine in October 2016, “I had God on my side that day. My life is a miracle.”¹¹

The fact that Christ is alive is also a miracle. He speaks through the Psalmist in words we will sing in just a few moments:

“I waited for the LORD; he stooped and heard my cry. He brought me from the *pit*, out of the dungeon mire, my feet set on a rock, my footsteps made secure. My lips he gave a song, a song to praise our God.”¹²

Christ sings these words with his church today. His words become our words, and we are saved.

Joseph was thrown into a pit and came out to become Pharaoh’s vice-regent, saving the people of Israel.

Christ came out of a pit to become Lord of heaven and earth, the Savior of his people. O church of God, look to him in faith. Amen.

¹¹ <https://people.com/where-is-baby-jessica-now-8729182> accessed 4-19-25

¹² *Trinity Psalter Hymnal*, 40B