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Sermon Transcript: God Keeps An Account

I was almost killed yesterday. Yeah. I was coming back from this wonderful celebration of serving event driving back from St. Louis. Stopped off at Cold Stone to get a nice big ice cream cake to celebrate my daughter Autumn's birthday, which is this weekend. They're back in town. I was so excited for this. And so I'm driving back from Cold Stone and I've got a stack of extra certificates and the pins that we gave out. Those are all over there in the passenger side, as is the ice cream cake over there in the passenger side.

And I'm driving down Old Collinsville Road and someone decides to turn into Rand, I think it's Rand Avenue, Rand Street, something like that. And then the person behind them decided, "You know what, it's my turn, too." And they decided instead of, you know, you go up and you usually then make a pretty quick 90-degree-like turn, this person decided to do some type of diagonal slow creep to get across the intersection. And so what I saw was a car turning in front of me. No problem. Fine. They're getting out of the way. And then suddenly from behind where their turn came, this car directly at my car in my lane, and it was coming at me and I slammed on the brakes as they just barely made it in front of me before I plowed into them.

As I'm slamming on the brakes, I'm hearing the car behind me slamming their brakes. And in a quick look in the rearview mirror, I see that car doing one of these, coming up ready to meet the back end of my car. And never mind the fact that as I slammed on the brakes, the car started to twist sideways and drift into the oncoming traffic that was coming. And now, while all this is going on, I don't know if you've ever had this happen to you, but as I slam on the brakes, the certificates, the pins, the ice cream cake is all moving. And for a moment, in the midst of all this near-death experience, I actually did this with one of my hands from the wheel—like, like I was going to catch the cake or what was this, Rob? What were we doing? I'm like, "Oh, I'm worried about cake right now." But that's what I did. Cake survived. The cake survived!

It originally said "Happy Birthday Autumn" on top of it, and well, let's just say that by the time we celebrated the evening, it said "Happy"—there was the remnant of the words still on the cake and it was—yes, it survived in a manner of speaking, let's say. So yes.

Vengeance and Ice Cream Cake

And then the moment came. We're like, we're all and we're going and we're drifting. Cars are coming and everything came to a stop for a second. And the car behind me is just, you know, that far away. And the cars coming stopped just in time. And I'm in this weird Starsky and Hutch, Dukes of Hazzard kind of sideways maneuver. And then I just like, okay. And I hit the gas and zipped around and went on my way.

Now, I want to tell you that your pastor in that moment said, "Oh, well, I certainly hope that person who irresponsibly turned across the intersection is doing okay. I wholeheartedly forgive them with my Christian heart and wish them well as they go upon their day. Perhaps they were in a hurry for good reason, and I just don't understand." I would love to tell you that's what happened. That is not the thought that went through your pastor's mind.

Instead, I thought of the great vengeance and wrath of Rob that could be unleashed upon this person. For a moment, I thought, I'm—I'm going to turn around and that—that neighborhood back there is not that big. And so, I'm going to just turn around and I'm going to find that car and I'll see them where, you know, and I start to imagine like they're going to pull—and they're driving, and I'm going to pull up behind and I'm going to get out. I'm going to give them the business. "You know what you did? You almost—" I had this whole—I'm going to follow them to their house and chase them down and tell them what they did wrong. And I played this all out in my head and had no place to turn around, though. And I went—but I'll tell you, I did not do that.

I mean, let's be honest, how well could that have gone anyway in the first place, right? But there are two things. There are two reasons, two reasons why I did not go chase them down. The first of which is: I got Jesus in my heart. And I thought, "You know, this is not going to—this is not going to be good. It will not turn out well. I will not speak the words of peace and forgiveness and love and mercy that I preach. If I do that, it is not good for your soul, Rob, for you to chase down that car. May not be good for your safety either. But let's just leave that alone."

But I will admit to you the second and perhaps more compelling reason why I did not is because it was a very hot day and I had an ice cream cake in my car. And when I say I had it in my car, I had it in my car and I needed to get that home. Yeah. So, vengeance doesn't always work out so well. I don't know if you've tried it, but it doesn't. Even when someone does something so stupid that it puts your life at danger, I'm not always sure that vengeance is best placed in your hands.

Oh, also, back up on this is that for the last two weeks, I've had incredible back pain. I've just been in a lot of pain. Don't worry, the medical community has thoroughly medicated me. So, you have a—this is a drug-enhanced sermon you're getting. I'm telling you that right now. There's muscle relaxants and Advil and Tylenol and lidocaine just all working in this body right now in front of you. So, I know that because of that pain and irritation that I do not think that the world may be getting the best version of Pastor Rob right now. And this may not be a time when I need to choose vengeance and retribution as my move, because again, I do not think the best version will come out.

Human Trafficking in Joel 3

This passage we have today is with Joel speaking to the people, and they have been wronged. They have horrible crimes committed. Did you hear this passage of what the people from Tyre and Sidon have been doing? And this isn't a military operation, a conflict, a war. This is commerce. This is commercial powers making money off of the people of Judah by taking their children, selling the

sons for prostitutes, the daughters for wine—and they drank the wine. That was a weird detail to throw in there, but did you hear it? Yeah. And they drank the wine that they got from selling the daughters. And then they carried off these children to lands far away.

This is basically 2,500 years ago. This is human trafficking being done against the people of Judah, God's people. They're suffering through this. And what's happening is that they're either not in a position or just outrage isn't welling up enough for the people there to do something about it. Or maybe they're not empowered to. And certainly, the people of Tyre and Sidon are not rising to the occasion going, "Hey, you know what? That stuff we're doing with the kids, maybe we shouldn't do that." Nobody's rising up and speaking on behalf of the people. Is anyone even noticing what's happening to the children and to the people?

That's the question in front of them. And Joel is telling them, giving them a message from God that says, "I see what's happening to you. And while it might seem like the world is not keeping an account of what's going on, I'm keeping an account," says God. "I see what's being done. I recognize the injustice." And sometimes that's all we need. It's a good starting point for us to know that we're not crazy. This thing that we're seeing that is wrong is wrong. And God sees it—is a place of comfort. And sometimes all we can do in the midst of such circumstances is lament, is cry out to God, and have faith that God sees what's happening and that God is keeping an account.

God keeps the account. But make no mistake: we keep the work. There is still work for us to do in the midst of this. But we have to be careful, because what we do as human beings is we hear passages like this and we go, "Oh yeah, the Tyre and Sidons of the world. I've got my own list. Let me pull it out for you and tell you who these evildoers are." And look, sometimes you get it right. And you know what else? Sometimes you get it wrong. And we have to be careful that we don't take these words of the prophet to simply be an open blank check for you to write against the enemy du jour for you.

We have to carry a humility with what we exercise when it comes to justice. Remember the words of another great prophet, Micah, who said, "Do justice." Yeah, do justice. When you see injustice, you act on it. You do justice—and you love kindness in the same breath. Justice and kindness, or mercy as it sometimes is translated, held right there together. And how do we hold this together? Comes the next words from the prophet Micah: "And walk humbly with your God." Check yourself before you wreck yourself. Be careful as you exercise this hard, impossible balance of mercy and justice.

The Uncomfortable Ending

I want to go back to the passage for a second, because I didn't go all the way to the end in what I recounted for you, did I? I didn't hit that last verse. If you were paying attention to the reading today as Keley did it, when we got to the last verse, something inside of you should have recoiled. Something inside of you should have turned and felt very uncomfortable, because it didn't quite sound like God stuff there. It didn't quite sound like the Bible kind of stuff to us.

Because what it basically said was God says, "I see what they're doing to you, people of Judah. I see you, Tyre and Sidon. I see how you've trafficked our children, my children made in my image as revealed in Genesis, bearing the image of God. You have trafficked them. You traded them for prostitutes and wine, and you drank the wine, and you sent them off to land so far away they'll never get back." And then the Lord God said, "And you know what? I'm going to do the exact same thing back to you."

What? That does not sound like the God who's merciful and kind and abounding in steadfast love and forgives, said, "You traffic my kids, I'm going to traffic your kids. I'm going to sell them to the people of Judah and then they're going to sell them off to another foreign land." Does that make you feel a little uncomfortable to hear that come in this reading? It should, because we live in a very different day. And I wish I could just pull out for you like, here—here's this nifty little pastor preaching trick and it's going to make everybody feel good about it. Yay! It's the pixie dust of preaching, and now we'll be able to swipe it all away. But it is uncomfortable.

What I can tell you is that we need to remember that we are reading a text that is 2,500 years old. Have you ever tried to watch one of those movies from the 70s and realized how inappropriate it is? Have you ever taken something that you used to love years ago and now you watch it with your modern mind and you go, "That's not good"? Yeah, that's just stuff that's like 40 years old that you do that to. Imagine something 2,500 years old from a different culture and a different country.

So, we have to understand what's trying to be accomplished here. And so, what does give some understanding to this text is to say at this time period there is only one structure for the law. It's not personal responsibility; it's corporate responsibility. It's—it's national responsibility. If a country does something, the whole country suffers the guilt of it. That's the way justice works in this culture 2,500 years ago. It's eye for an eye.

And so the message that Joel is trying to deliver is that this injustice that you have experienced, your God sees it. Your God has an account of it. Your God is not forgetting this. And there will be justice. And the—and the clearest way to express to you that this will be a full and complete justice is if I tell you—if I express it to you in this eye-for-an-eye language. It's not a complete just response if God does not return what was done to them back upon the enemy. "You kill one of us, we kill one of you. You traffic our kids, we traffic yours." It sounds awful, but that's the way you express the idea that this will be complete justice.

Now, historically, we know that never happened—that precise expression of justice did not get enacted. Does that mean that God did not fulfill that? No. It just means it was fulfilled in a way that they didn't expect. But the message that's trying to be put across here—and it happens at other times in our Bible, and you may not be familiar with the other times in your Bible because us preachers don't like preaching these texts because it's hard and it's confusing. But if we can hold on to this in the moment, which is just to say is that this passage is trying to tell us that God will enact justice. That God takes a full account of all the wrongs and injustice that you see out in the world. You're not going crazy. There is one who has a full and accurate account. And when the

world tries to tell you, "No, that's not what really happened. This is what happened," or if it's a personal conflict between you and another person and that person is conveying a different truth than what you know about what happened in that situation, you need to know that there is one who has the capability and the intention to keep a full account, and there will be justice.

Walking Humbly with Justice

In Paul, Romans speaks to this. Paul says that—that we need to leave room for God's wrath, for God's vengeance. We leave room for that. But then one chapter later in Romans, Paul says, "But make no mistake that the powers that are in control act as agents of God's wrath." There's a lot of places of the Bible—and it happens there in those two chapters for Paul—where very quickly we're told: vengeance is not a job for you. Enacting the solutions to justice is not a one-person job. It's a community job. Which means that if we're going to do this, if we're going to build something that's truly just to respond to the injustice, we need to do that as a community with humility.

Because Lord knows that when we've tried to make laws to take care of things that we thought were wrong, we've gotten that wrong in the past. We've made up some pretty horrible laws. We've used justice in pretty horrible ways, in a lot of good ways, too. But it's not to say it's bad or good; it's to say it's flawed. And we have to keep that humility that we're told in Micah to walk humbly with God in all of our efforts to be agents of justice. Because when it comes time to enact on injustice, we got to be real careful, because sometimes we're acting out of our own pain and we don't make good judgments. Sometimes we're acting out of our own fear and we don't make good judgments. Sometimes we just need to trust that God has this ultimately, and we need to rest—and this is a time for us to lament, to simply express to God our pain and know that our God hears that. That's what we get out of this passage.

You know, we said before, God is merciful, abounding in steadfast love, forgiving iniquities and sins. But if we keep reading in Exodus 34, what we hear is the very next phrase: "But God does not clear the guilty." Somehow God holds that mercy and forgiveness right there next to a statement and a truth about justice, and that the guilty are still counted.

And this is a job that should not be left to a pastor with a bad back who got cut off on Old Collinsville Road. And I'm guessing that you're not so qualified for it either. You've got pains. You've got experiences in life. And you have amazing qualities about you that make you both a great person for the job and the worst person for the job.

So when we find ourselves in these situations, while God does keep the account, we still keep the work of trying to enact justice in imperfect ways and do what is right and stand up for those who are being oppressed and look for those who are weak and hurting and do not let that happen. Do not stay silent like the people did around Joel at that time. Speak up. Act out. It might cost you something, but that is important.

But in the midst of all that, hold on to the knowledge that the resolution of this does not lie on your shoulders. That the fullness of justice is handled by God. Because that job of holding mercy and

justice side by side, that's a hard job. So with humility, we work that careful balancing act. With humility, we attempt to be agents of what is good and kind and faithful and merciful and yet still just.

But along the way, when you find yourself in one of those dark places where you are being victimized, where people you care about are being victimized, and you wonder what could possibly be done in this situation, when you recognize how impossible the situation feels for you to correct it, recognize that God sees this, that ultimately God's justice will prevail. It may not be in your lifetime or in the way that you want it to be, but trust—trust that this difficult balance is best in the hands of our God.

And when we do that, we don't feel so alone in our suffering because someone is seeing this too. And we don't feel the full weight of having to fix it all ourselves because someone ultimately has that as well. It doesn't exempt us from participating in justice and correcting what is wrong. But it does take the burden—the full burden—of completing what is incomplete, of mending what is broken. We can trust that our God is with us.

There still may be something uncomfortable about this for you. And if it is, then that means you're living in Joel chapter 3, verses 1 through 8. I'd love to tell you that when we get to verse 9 and the raining, it's all going to get smoothed over for you. But it's not, because friends, life is—life is messy. And this is hard to be the people of God. It is hard to be forgiving and just. I'm so glad it's not left up to me. I'm so glad to have my God.

Hallelujah.

Amen.