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Exodus 23:7b, NIV

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A homicide.

I've talked in the past about people I have met as a hospital chaplain, always changing the stories so that no one can identify the individuals involved. I appreciate you trusting me to keep to the spirit of the story without divulging anything that should be kept private. This time, I'm changing many details. The story concerns a patient, a very young woman with a long, complex medical history. I spent time with her when she was in the hospital multiple times over a period of several years. She had an illness that was life-threatening and required a series of high-risk surgeries. She was an alcoholic and drug addict. She had had a bad childhood. She sometimes lived on the street, sleeping in a tent that the cops made her move every three days. But the officers were kind to her. We'll call her Nancy. Nancy had a long history of not complying with medical advice. She didn't take necessary medications, didn't go to follow-up exams, didn't stick

to the diet she was supposed to follow, and didn't seek help when she had frightening symptoms. My understanding is that her illness would have been quite treatable early on with surgery and medication if she had cooperated with medical professionals. But her condition snowballed over a period of a few years due to her non-compliance. She ended up back in the hospital, after living on the street for several months, when her symptoms became extremely severe. Nancy was scheduled for another high-risk surgery. She would have died without it. The result was not good, but I'll get back to this.

Let's look at our quote from Exodus. This is one book of the Bible that has a very appropriate name. It concerns the period of time from about 1450 B.C. to 1200 B.C. It is the account of what happened after Jacob and his family entered into Egypt. Hundreds of years after they came to Egypt, the Israelites had been enslaved. The Book of Exodus tells us how they were freed. Through the hand of God, the Pharaoh loses control of them, and the descendants of Jacob flee into the desert. The book ends with Moses, now the leader of the Israelites, coming down from the mountain after forty days to find the Israelites having abandoned God and turned to idolatry. They are worshipping a golden calf. Moses breaks the tablets that God has given him, tablets containing the Commandments. But God is forgiving; the people turn back to God, Moses goes back up the mountain

and gets new tablets, and the Israelites erect a tabernacle to house the tablets.

However, Moses will not enter the Promised Land with his people.

Our quote comes from deep within the Book of Exodus. This part of the book concerns the covenant between God and the Israelites. They are at the foot of Mt. Sinai. God has given Moses the Ten Commandments, sometimes called the Decalogue. But there is more detail that must be conveyed to the Israelites in order for them to understand how they must live. Moses acts as a mediator between God and God's people. While the Ten Commandments deliver firm, absolute rules that the people must follow, the material that Moses now conveys from God to God's people concerns somewhat fuzzier issues. This is what all of us experience in life. We know there are certain things we must never do. But often there is a gray zone, a situation that's not so obvious. This is when the moral code that Moses delivers, rules that go beyond the Ten Commandments, comes into play. This material is often called the Book of the Covenant. It tells God's people how to prepare a proper altar to God, and how certain offenses are to be dealt with, such as what to do when one person physically harms another, or what to do when a person's property has been stolen or damaged. It also tells us how to behave in an ethical way, and how to properly follow the religious calendar of the Israelites. Our quote comes from the part of the Book of the

Covenant that deals with ethical ways of living. In particular, 23:7 tells the Israelites that they must *“not put an innocent or honest person to death, for I will not acquit the guilty”*. I, of course, is God. Although this is a good translation for modern readers, and it comes from the New International Version, perhaps a better translation can be found in the English Standard Version, which says: *“do not kill the innocent and righteous, for I will not acquit the wicked.”* Notice the word “righteous”. Yes, it more or less means honest, as the NIV suggests. But when we look at the original Hebrew of the Book of Exodus, the word that appears is *“saddiq”*. It’s an important word, used very frequently in Scripture. It’s related to the word lawful or just. In this context, it refers to someone’s character. The Israelites are not to kill or put to death someone whose character is righteous, someone who lives the way God wants them to live and who has in their heart the desire to live in a just way. It’s a rather subjective thing, something that can be very hard for an earthly legal system to judge. But our laws here in this country descend from the Book of the Covenant. Even today, our courts try to follow this law, to not execute anyone who is righteous.

What I want to talk about today is the responsibility that we all have in life to follow God’s laws, to follow the Book of the Covenant, at least as much of it as is still relevant to Christians following the New Testament. There are rules about

how to worship God that don't apply to us under the New Covenant, but when it comes to the parts of the Old Testament Book of the Covenant that relate to ethical behavior, most of it is very applicable to us today. Certainly, we do not believe that someone who is righteous, who is honest, who is innocent, should die. In fact, we have to be more than just reactive in following God's law: we must be proactive. It's not good enough to be passive, to simply not sentence to death or kill a righteous person ourselves; we have to do our best to always protect righteous people. There are times when U.S. law doesn't force us to take action, but when the Book of the Covenant does require us to take action. God's laws are stricter than human laws; this is what is wrong with society today.

So, back to Nancy. She had friends and relatives who, like her, struggled with drug addiction. Nancy had been caught having illegal drugs in the hospital on multiple occasions. We think of nurses as people who are the hands-on deliverers of medical care, the people who are near us when we are in the hospital, who are aware of our immediate situation, who administer medication, who draw blood and watch our vitals for us. All of this is true. Nurses take on tremendous responsibility when caring for patients. But they do more – a lot more – than is technically required. They also comfort patients. They inform family members about the condition of their loved ones, and often this is a nasty

job. Nurses console people when loved ones die. Between their official and unofficial duties, nurses are often kept running nonstop through twelve-hour shifts. While we rarely find ourselves responsible for the welfare of people outside of our families, nurses, over the course of a career, care for and protect many thousands of people. One of things that our modern society is very lacking in is a sense that the rest of us should be vigilant, that we should be looking out after others. We should make sure that no righteous person is harmed.

Nancy was being proactively protected by people, largely nurses. They were aware that Nancy had a problem with drug addiction. They asked the chaplains to help with this. We were tasked with carefully filtering those who were allowed to enter the hospital and see Nancy. The decision was made to allow no adults to visit her, as people had smuggled drugs into Nancy's room during previous hospital stays - and once already during that current visit. She was an addict, and addicts will do just about anything to obtain drugs. They will also use drugs, even under the most dangerous circumstances, such as before a critical, perilous surgery, when the patient is already horribly weakened. We allowed only her children in to see her, and they had to be carefully supervised. I was called in one evening – the night before her big surgery – to escort two of her three kids in and out of the hospital. I met them and their grandfather, who had

custody of them, at the front door. It was two girls, one in middle school and one in kindergarten. They were polite, mature kids. The older one was a loving, protective big sister, who held the smaller one's hand as we went up the stairs, took the little one's coat off of her outside their mom's ICU room, and helped the younger one open the little carton of milk that a nurse got for the smaller girl. Their mom was very frightened about her looming surgery, but she was joyous at seeing her girls. I remember how hollow and aged her young face appeared. I stayed with them in the ICU room; there was concern that some adult might have given one of the kids something illicit to pass on to their mother, and my job was to make sure that didn't happen. The big one talked to her mother while the little one knelt on the floor, and using a chair bottom as a desk, she drew pictures for her mommy. When it came time for the visit to end, they gave their mother hugs, the older girl promised to look after the younger one, and Nancy tearfully said goodbye. I led them out to their grandfather. I went back to Nancy's room and talked to her for a bit, trying to help calm her so that she could sleep before her surgery. She thanked me repeatedly for taking her kids in to see her, but she looked desperate. I went home. Nancy was due to be taken into the OR at 6 A.M.

Early the next morning, the phone woke Wendy and me up. It was another chaplain, who happened to be on call that morning, and she told me that Nancy

was dead. She said that as soon as they had Nancy in the OR and had administered anesthesia, her heart stopped. The shocked OR team worked furiously for over an hour to restart her heart. But she was finally declared dead, the surgery having never even begun. In the minutes after she was declared dead, the doctors began to wonder what had gone wrong. In particular, they wondered if perhaps someone had slipped drugs into the hospital and given them to Nancy in her ICU room before her surgery. They began searching through hospital video. They found Nancy's sister – who was also known to be an intravenous drug user - on hospital surveillance video. They discovered that very early that morning, Nancy's sister had shown up at the hospital and begged the nighttime administrator in charge of the hospital to be allowed in to see her sister before her big surgery. She got teary; the administrator felt sorry for her; she was let in – and she was carrying a backpack.

Many people worked hard to protect Nancy, but somebody who did not have her best interest in mind slipped into the hospital and apparently gave her drugs. It seemed that the two sisters must have gotten high together – just an hour or so before Nancy was taken to surgery. With drugs still in her system, Nancy was put under anesthesia. The combination of chemicals was apparently too much. She died immediately. Soon thereafter, a syringe was found in

Nancy's room. But here is the big question. Was Nancy *innocent and righteous*?

Yes. She was an addict - born with a vulnerability that she was unable to conquer.

But another person, someone who certainly should have been motivated to protect Nancy – well, God will not acquit the wicked who commits a homicide.

One of our greatest sins as a civilization is that we do not look after each other. One of the principles of early Christianity was to be responsible for the welfare of other Christians. Many of us are not aware that the early Christians practiced charity, including providing food, money, housing, and physical protection – to non-Christians. It was enough to prevent a Roman Emperor named Julian in about 360 A.D. from being able to revive paganism. People understood that Christians – and not the Roman government - took care of them. We recently abandoned friends of the United States in Afghanistan. Our society has forgotten about protecting the righteous. Please pray with me.

God, let us protect those who are at risk. Show us when there is a child or any vulnerable person who is unsafe. Let us provide them food, clothing, housing, or physical protection – whatever it takes. Let us, as Christians, have a sense of responsibility that our modern society has abandoned. May we always protect the righteous, no matter who they are. May Christians be known as the people who still follow this commandment from the Book of the Covenant. Amen.