

EXODUS 20:22 – 23:33 – THE BOOK OF THE COVENANT

In the last few weeks we have been dealing with the initial introduction of Israel to the Law of God. In doing so, we have entered into what some have called the “second phase” of the book of Exodus. The first phase shows us how God liberated Israel from bondage in Egypt. This second part shows us the installation of the Law. However, this isn’t a one-sided affair. Israel will have the opportunity and the right to reject the Law of God if they desire. This is a covenant event. It is here that Israel will strike a “deal” as it were, with God and He with them. It is here that they enter into a covenant relationship with God. We as individuals are able to do the same.

God had made a covenant with Abraham years earlier and promised that his descendants would return to the land and that they would number as the stars of the heaven and the sand of the sea. Now, Israel has the option of receiving that promise as a nation or “voiding” God’s covenant with Abraham if they, as a nation of individuals do not want to be bound by a covenant made prior to them even being alive or existing as a nation.

Imagine a group such as us moving through a landscape like you see in a Mad Max movie or the Book of Eli. When we reach our destination, what will our society be like? That sort of preparation is what we see happening here.

We pick up today with God reiterating that He alone is God and that He will dictate how He is to be worshipped and how His

people, his family are to act in order to reflect His character and His values.

Exodus 20

18 Now all the people witnessed the thunderings, the lightning flashes, the sound of the trumpet, and the mountain smoking; and when the people saw it, they trembled and stood afar off. 19 Then they said to Moses, "You speak with us, and we will hear; but let not God speak with us, lest we die."

20 And Moses said to the people, "Do not fear; for God has come to test you, and that His fear may be before you, so that you may not sin." 21 So the people stood afar off, but Moses drew near the thick darkness where God was.

Exodus 20: 22-26

The Law of the Altar

22 Then the Lord said to Moses, "Thus you shall say to the children of Israel: 'You have seen that I have talked with you from heaven. 23 You shall not make anything to be with Me—gods of silver or gods of gold you shall not make for yourselves. 24 An altar of earth you shall make for Me, and you shall sacrifice on it your burnt offerings and your peace offerings, your sheep and your oxen. In every place where I record My name I will come to you, and I will bless you. 25 And if you make Me an altar of stone, you shall not build it of hewn stone; for if you use your tool on it, you have profaned it. 26 Nor shall you go up by steps to My altar, that your nakedness may not be exposed on it.'

Once again we must see that Israel has a purpose. They are to be different from all the nations around them. The pagans

worshipped at their temples in drunken parties where temple prostitutes and nudity were the norm. They also had elevated altars to their pagan gods.

Once Israel was in the Promised Land and the Priesthood was established, the priests were to be fully clothed. For now, any altar to god was to be made of earth or unhewn stone.

God had not revealed Himself to man in all His glory. This was done for a reason. Once man has a “tangible” god it becomes an idol. The idol can then be made in the image of man. At that point it is tainted by the mind of man and is therefore less than a true God. The altars of the Israelites were to be low in stature and plain. This way God would get all the glory and not the structure itself or those that built it. Later, when Israel does have a raised altar the priests were instructed to wear undergarments so that no skin would be shown as they climbed the stairs. This would have been a distraction.

What God *does* want from us in worship is seen by Jesus' statement in John 4:24: *God is Spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth.* God wants worship that is characterized by *Spirit* (as opposed to flesh) and *truth* (as opposed to deception or mere feeling).

a. **Now these are the judgments:** Exodus chapters 21-23 contain many laws on a wide variety of subjects, including:

- ☐ Employment law regarding the treatment of servants
- ☐ Murder, manslaughter, and violent assault
- ☐ Liability for one's animals and responsibility for the animals of others

- ❑ Theft, responsibility, and restitution
- ❑ Rape, dowry, and the value of a woman's virginity
- ❑ Idolatry and sorcery
- ❑ Treatment of disadvantaged people in society
- ❑ Money and property lending
- ❑ Justice and equal standing before the law

"These 'laws,' or, better, 'judgments' (*mispatim*), are given as precedents to guide Israel's civil magistrates in the cases of civil dispute." (Kaiser)

As we enter chapter 21, the focus turns to slaves or servants. I will camp out here shortly because this is such a misunderstood part of the OT. When Americans and people in modern times in general hear the word slavery, they automatically think of what is called chattel slavery. This was the type of slavery that went on before the civil war. That is not the same thing as is being spoken of in the Bible.

These “slaves” were indentured servants. They were either there because of a debt they owed or were young women “sold” in this way to settle a debt and would one day marry into the family.

- Servants had to be released after six years of servitude but could stay if they so desired. (Awh in the ear)
- “Slaves” enjoyed all the basic human rights of anyone else.
- Women that didn’t wind up marrying into the family were to be released or to be treated as a married daughter. This

was a more comfortable life for many of the women as they were more often than not from poorer families.

Verses 12 – 17 deal with capital punishment.

- Difference between pre-meditated murder and manslaughter.
- There had to be at least two witnesses to the crime in order for an execution.
- Cities of refuge
- Israel had no police force. It was up to the family to ensure justice but these laws were in place to keep family members from going too far.
- The failure to execute the guilty murderer polluted the land according to God. That is food for thought.

Verses 18 – 32 deal with personal injury and making restitution to the injured party.

- No scheister attorneys were needed.
- Judgments were made according to the injury and time lost at work. This avoided all the crazy punitive damages awarded nowadays.
- If you tore it up, you had to make it right. That was all – nothing more, nothing less.

Chapters' 21: 33 – 22:15 deal with property damage and compensation.

- Et al. burning another's fields or letting your ox graze on another man's land.

- You should return another man's animal if you see it wandering away. This is the right thing to do whether you like the man or not.
- This section also deals with theft of another's property.
- If the thief was caught in the act and surprised you, you could kill him.
- If you didn't catch him in the act he would have to go before the judges to determine guilt.

Verses 16 and 17 of chapter 22 deal with rape.

- Unmarried girls were seen as belonging to their father and any girl that was not a virgin would not be sought after as a wife. She would have been doomed in many respects. (Remain unmarried and have no means of support in her old age)
- The loss of her virginity would deprive her essentially of a good life and would deprive her father of the bridal price. This was a dowry that would help the family and the girl if she were ever widowed and had no means of support.
- The offender was required to marry the girl unless her father wouldn't have him as a son-in-law. In that case the offender would have to come up with the dowry and she would be free.
- If the girl was betrothed, the rape was considered to be adultery and the offender would be tried under the law governing that offense. He would be executed. If the girl was a willing participant she would also be guilty of adultery and would also be executed.

Beginning in 22:18, we read of the prohibition of sorcery,

bestiality, idolatry, selfishness and the reviling of authority. These all go against the character of God and civilized society.

Regarding authority, we are told in Romans 13 that we are to obey the authorities, because they are ministers of God for wrath upon the evildoer. This is speaking of Law enforcement and those in the judicial system that administer punishment.

In verse 29 of chapter 22 God says:

29 "You shall not delay to offer the first of your ripe produce and your juices. The firstborn of your sons you shall give to Me. 30 Likewise you shall do with your oxen and your sheep. It shall be with its mother seven days; on the eighth day you shall give it to Me.

You shall not delay to offer the first of your ripe produce and your juices: Another way to honor God is by giving Him his due. When we are commanded to give something to God, it is a sin to not give it - or to **delay** in giving it.

"True obedience is prompt and present, ready and speedy, without demurs and consults." (Trapp)

The firstborn of your sons you shall give to Me: According to Exodus 13:11-12, this command was to be obeyed *when they came into the land of Canaan*. Much of the Mosaic Law didn't make sense for Israel in the wilderness, and was given to prepare them for life in Canaan.

Had they obeyed and trusted God the way they should have, they were at this point only a little more than a year away from Canaan. Because of unbelief and disobedience, they were some

40 years from Canaan, but they didn't know that at this giving of the law.

The firstborn of your sons you shall give to Me: This was done through *redemption*, the giving of money to substitute for the son (Exodus 34:19-20). Money was also substituted for the firstborn among unclean animals, but the firstborn among clean animals was sacrificed to the LORD.

i. This law regarding the giving of the firstborn to God was important because:

☐ Since the firstborn was regarded as best, it was a demonstrative way to give the best to God.

☐ It reminded Israel that God regarded them as His firstborn, His favored people

☐ It reminded Israel that God spared their firstborn when He judged the firstborn of Egypt

Chapter 23 gives more laws and expands on some that have already been given. Israel was instructed not to follow a crowd to do evil. We tell our children this all the time. We are to carefully choose our friends. Children and adults have a tendency to be chameleons. That is we can blend into our surroundings; i.e. follow the crowd. Some wise prophet has put it this way: "If you lie down with the dogs, you will get up with fleas."

We are to be different. Our Christian character, the very influence of the Holy Spirit on our lives should set us apart.

God goes on to explain to Moses that Israel is to celebrate by having a feast three times a year; the Passover, another feast

when they planted their crops and yet another feast when they gathered their crops.

They were to work the fields six days a week and rest on the seventh. They were to work the fields six years and then rest the seventh year. This was the Sabbath day and the Sabbath year.

Israel began to ignore the Sabbath year and they were thereby punished by being conquered and carried away to Babylon for 70 years as punishment.

Look at chapter 23 beginning at verse 20.

The Angel and the Promises

20 "Behold, I send an Angel before you to keep you in the way and to bring you into the place which I have prepared.

21 Beware of Him and obey His voice; do not provoke Him, for He will not pardon your transgressions; for My name is in Him. 22 But if you indeed obey His voice and do all that I speak, then I will be an enemy to your enemies and an adversary to your adversaries. 23 For My Angel will go before you and bring you in to the Amorites and the Hittites and the Perizzites and the Canaanites and the Hivites and the Jebusites; and I will cut them off. 24 You shall not bow down to their gods, nor serve them, nor do according to their works; but you shall utterly overthrow them and completely break down their sacred pillars.

25 "So you shall serve the Lord your God, and He will bless your bread and your water. And I will take sickness away from the midst of you. 26 No one shall suffer miscarriage or be barren in your land; I will fulfill the number of your days.

27 "I will send My fear before you, I will cause confusion

among all the people to whom you come, and will make all your enemies turn their backs to you. 28 And I will send hornets before you, which shall drive out the Hivite, the Canaanite, and the Hittite from before you. 29 I will not drive them out from before you in one year, lest the land become desolate and the beasts of the field become too numerous for you. 30 Little by little I will drive them out from before you, until you have increased, and you inherit the land. 31 And I will set your bounds from the Red Sea to the sea, Philistia, and from the desert to the River. For I will deliver the inhabitants of the land into your hand, and you shall drive them out before you. 32 You shall make no covenant with them, nor with their gods. 33 They shall not dwell in your land, lest they make you sin against Me. For if you serve their gods, it will surely be a snare to you.”

Here are listed some promises that would be fulfilled if Israel held up her end of the covenant. Needless to say, they didn't do that. Therefore there was sickness and miscarriage in the land. There is sickness on the whole earth today due to the fact that sin entered the world through Adam. We are born into a sick world that will one day be redeemed.

If you look closely you should see that the word “Angel” in this section of the text has a capital “A.” This is because this is not your ordinary run of the mill angel. This is none other than Jesus Himself. This is known as a Christophany – an appearance of Jesus prior to His incarnation. This is seen many times in the OT. Jesus led Israel to the Promised Land. Of course we are also to follow Jesus. When we do that we get into a lot less trouble.

“But if you indeed obey His voice and do all that I speak:” It was characteristic of the Mosaic covenant that blessing was

based almost purely on Israel's performance. If they obeyed, they would be blessed. If they disobeyed, they would be cursed. Please note that they were still children of God, they didn't lose that status. Even later when both the House of Israel and the House of Judah were exiled, the prophet Hosea foretold of a restoration and redemption.

- i. Under the New Covenant we operate on a different principle. Though there are inevitable consequences of sin and God's loving correction for disobedience, we are blessed in Jesus, and not because we have been obedient (Ephesians 1:3).
- ii. c. ***"You shall not bow down to their gods:"*** The Canaanite people were deeply depraved and morally degraded, and this was a natural result of the depraved and degraded idol gods they served. Therefore it was essential that Israel did not imitate their idol worship or allow it to continue.
- iii.
- iv. i. "Concerning the people to be driven out, it is worthy of note that this paragraph shows that 'their gods' were their undoing. **"Everything in the life of a man or a nation depends on the character of its worship." (Morgan)**

b. Little by little: God promised to drive out the enemies of Israel from Canaan, but He would not drive them out all at once. Israel may have wanted to have the land all cleared out before them, but God knew it was not best for the land or for them.

i. Though it sometimes frustrates us, this is often the way God works in our lives. He clears things out little by little, though we might prefer it all at once. But God wanted Israel to have increased in the process of taking the Promised Land. He

wanted them to grow. God cares that we grow, and so He often grows us little by little. (When you see all the flaws of your house.)

ii. **"God crumbles his mercies to us; we have his blessings by retail. So the cloud empties not itself at a sudden burst, but dissolves upon the earth drop by drop." (Trapp)**

c. ***"Lest the land become desolate and the beast of the field become too numerous:"*** This was just one reason why it was better for God to defeat their enemies little by little. Doing it in what seemed to be the easy way - clearing out all of Israel's enemies at once - had consequences Israel could not see or appreciate.

4. (31-33) Boundaries of Israel's inheritance.

"And I will set your bounds from the Red Sea to the sea, Philistia, and from the desert to the River. For I will deliver the inhabitants of the land into your hand, and you shall drive them out before you. You shall make no covenant with them, nor with their gods. They shall not dwell in your land, lest they make you sin against Me. For if you serve their gods, it will surely be a snare to you."

i. There is a spiritual principle here. God may grant, but we must possess. He withholds our possession of many blessings until we will partner with Him in bold faith and obedience. We have been granted every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ (Ephesians 1:3); but will only possess what we will partner with Him in faith and obedience to receive.

iii. God is not an indulgent, spoiling father, pouring out on His

children resources, blessings, and gifts they are not ready to receive or be responsible with. When His people are ready to possess in faith, what was promised becomes realized.

b. ***“You shall make no covenant with them:”*** Through lack of discernment, Israel did end up making a covenant with some of the people of the land (Joshua 9). There is no area of the law that Israel - or anyone - has ever kept perfectly.

Israel was to be a holy nation, a priesthood; an example and a mediator between those that didn't know God and God Himself. They were to be walking, talking imagers of God here on earth. God resided among them. They, the Israelites inhabited the sacred space chosen by God as His until the entire earth could be retaken as His Temple.

We have the same mission at this time on earth. We are to be light to those around us. We are to be different so that we stand out amongst the world.

How are we to do this? First of all, we have to fear God and serve Him. We have to be law-abiding citizens. We are to carefully choose those with whom we associate, while at the same time we minister to those who don't know God. While we don't want to “Get up with fleas,” we still have a responsibility to the lost.

We are to worship God with our time, talent and our treasury. We can't delay or deny God the worship He deserves. Think about all He has done for us and know that He wants to do more for us. He wants to deliver you from more than He already has.

We can't wander aimlessly in the wilderness. Follow Jesus, the Angel of the Lord and even though things won't be perfect on this side of Heaven, they will be much better. And you will soon look behind you to see that others want what you have - Jesus.

God has chosen each and every believer to reflect His glory into this world. Each of us has the privilege of being His viceroy. We are each a temple inhabiting sacred space, reflecting the glory of the Holy God we serve. What a privilege!