

Civil and Ceremonial Instructions for God's People

Exodus 21-23

Opening Prayer

Dear Heavenly Father, we praise you for the ways you revealed yourself to the Israelites under the old covenant and how you have revealed yourself to us now through your Son, Jesus. Grant that we may live in new service to you, not out of fear for our salvation but out of gratitude for the atoning sacrifice of Jesus. Even as we fail to live as you would have us, always remind us of your new covenant – that through Jesus, You welcome us poor sinners to have life with You. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

Introduction

After God gave His people the Ten Commandments, questions still remained – especially questions of punishment for broken laws and how the laws applied in certain situations. What would happen to a person who killed someone? Was the punishment the same if the killing was accidental instead of intentional? What if someone struck a man but did not kill him—what then? Would he be punished? How would he be punished? This portion of Exodus is an attempt to spell out some of the ramifications of the commandments as they applied to everyday living. “The Book of the Covenant” contains practical laws to guide God’s people in living out their covenant calling to be His holy nation. Three types or kinds of laws are given in the Book of the Covenant: (1) civil and penal laws; (2) social and moral laws; and (3) regulations for worship.

Civil and Penal Laws

Exodus 21:12-26

“Whoever strikes a man so that he dies shall be put to death. (13) But if he did not lie in wait for him, but God let him fall into his hand, then I will appoint for you a place to which he may flee. (14) But if a man willfully attacks another to kill him by cunning, you shall take him from my altar, that he may die.

(15) “Whoever strikes his father or his mother shall be put to death. (16) “Whoever steals a man and sells him, and anyone found in possession of him, shall be put to death. (17) “Whoever curses his father or his mother shall be put to death. (18) “When men quarrel and one strikes the other with a stone or with his fist and the man does not die but takes to his bed, (19) then if the man rises again and walks outdoors with his staff, he who struck him shall be clear; only he shall pay for the loss of his time, and shall have him thoroughly healed. (20) “When a man strikes his slave, male or female, with a rod and the slave dies under his hand, he shall be avenged. (21) But if the slave survives a day or two, he is not to be avenged, for the slave is his money. (22) “When men strive together and hit a pregnant woman, so that her children come out, but there is no harm, the one who hit her shall surely be fined, as the woman's husband shall impose on him, and he shall pay as the judges determine. (23) But if there is harm, then you shall pay life for life, (24) eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, (25) burn for burn, wound for wound, stripe for stripe. (26) “When a man strikes the eye of his slave, male or female, and destroys it, he shall let the slave go free because of his eye.

For the Hebrews questions arose early. In their world violence was a common way of settling disputes; physical assaults and punishment were a significant feature of life together. Just what did the commandment forbidding murder mean, and how did it apply if the person struck did not die? How liable was the attacker in cases where murder was not intended and responsibility was not clear?

1. What is most surprising about the rules there? Why do they seem so out of place in today's world? What seems to be the principle of justice here? See especially verses 23–24.
2. What was Jesus' comment on this principle in the following passage?

Matthew 5:38-40 "You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.' (39) But I say to you, Do not resist the one who is evil. But if anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also. (40) And if anyone would sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well.

3. How does the "law" of the Christian transcend the law given in Exodus? Was Jesus speaking on a societal level or a personal one? What principle was He establishing?

The Law cannot remove the desire for vengeance from our hearts; it can only, as it were, regulate revenge, setting a limit to it (eye for an eye). Jesus removes the impulse of revenge from our hearts and bids us live, as He Himself lived, in a love that recklessly exposes itself to the lovelessness of the world and the needs of others.

Exodus 22:9-17

For every breach of trust, whether it is for an ox, for a donkey, for a sheep, for a cloak, or for any kind of lost thing, of which one says, 'This is it,' the case of both parties shall come before God. The one whom God condemns shall pay double to his neighbor. (10) "If a man gives to his neighbor a donkey or an ox or a sheep or any beast to keep safe, and it dies or is injured or is driven away, without anyone seeing it, (11) an oath by the LORD shall be between them both to see whether or not he has put his hand to his neighbor's property. The owner shall accept the oath, and he shall not make restitution. (12) But if it is stolen from him, he shall make restitution to its owner. (13) If it is torn by beasts, let him bring it as evidence. He shall not make restitution for what has been torn. (14) "If a man borrows anything of his neighbor, and it is injured or dies, the owner not being with it, he shall make full restitution. (15) If the owner was with it, he shall not make restitution; if it was hired, it came for its hiring fee. (16) "If a man seduces a virgin who is not betrothed and lies with her, he shall give the bride-price for her and make her his wife. (17) If her father utterly refuses to give her to him, he shall pay money equal to the bride-price for virgins.

4. Notice how the principle of restitution was applied here in the explanation of the commandment against stealing. Would these laws be workable in our society? Why or why not?
5. How was restitution applied in vv. 16-17? How does the rule reflect a different culture than ours?

Social and Moral Laws

Exodus 22:21-28 "You shall not wrong a sojourner or oppress him, for you were sojourners in the land of Egypt. (22) You shall not mistreat any widow or fatherless child. (23) If you do mistreat them, and they cry out to me, I will surely hear their cry, (24) and my wrath will burn, and I will kill you with the sword, and your wives shall become widows and your children fatherless. (25) "If you lend money to any of my people with you who is poor, you shall not be like a moneylender to him, and you shall not exact interest from him. (26) If ever you take your neighbor's cloak in pledge, you shall return it to him before the sun goes down, (27) for that is his only covering, and it is his cloak for his body; in what else shall he sleep? And if he cries to me, I will hear, for I am compassionate. (28) "You shall not revile God, nor curse a ruler of your people.

Exodus 23:1-9 "You shall not spread a false report. You shall not join hands with a wicked man to be a malicious witness. (2) You shall not fall in with the many to do evil, nor shall you bear witness in a lawsuit, siding with the many, so as to pervert justice, (3) nor shall you be partial to a poor man in his lawsuit. (4) "If you meet your enemy's ox or his donkey going astray, you shall bring it back to him. (5) If you see the donkey of one who hates you lying down under its burden, you shall refrain from leaving him with it; you shall rescue it with him. (6) "You shall not pervert the justice due to your poor in his lawsuit. (7) Keep far from a false charge, and do not kill the innocent and righteous, for I will not acquit the wicked. (8) And you shall take no bribe, for a bribe blinds the clear-sighted and subverts the cause of those who are in the right. (9) "You shall not oppress a sojourner. You know the heart of a sojourner, for you were sojourners in the land of Egypt.

6. How were these laws different in tone and content from the civil and penal laws? What do they say about God? How would these laws and rules fit in today? Which ones would be most helpful in our world?
7. God as the protector of the helpless and the hopeless is an often-repeated theme in Scripture. Note how the prophet Isaiah gives the role of protector to the Messiah.

Isaiah 35:4-6 Say to those who have an anxious heart, "Be strong; fear not! Behold, your God will come with vengeance, with the recompense of God. He will come and save you." (5) Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; (6) then shall the lame man leap like a deer, and the tongue of the mute sing for joy. For waters break forth in the wilderness, and streams in the desert;

Isaiah 61:1-2 The Spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me, because the LORD has anointed me to bring good news to the poor; he has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to those who are bound; (2) to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all who mourn;

8. How does Jesus fulfill this role as Protector?

Luke 4:16-21 And he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up. And as was his custom, he went to the synagogue on the Sabbath day, and he stood up to read. (17) And the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written, (18) "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, (19) to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." (20) And he rolled up the scroll and gave it back to the attendant and sat down. And the eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. (21) And he began to say to them, "Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

Regulations for Worship

We don't know exactly how the Hebrews worshiped while they were in Egypt. It seems that their worship was not well organized and little was known about the true God. In fact, Moses asks God "when they ask me Your name, what should I tell them? (Exodus 3:13). A more elaborate form of worship was going to be a part of life for the free Hebrew people, and as is apparent from the golden calf incident in Exodus 32, some guidance was needed in just how to worship and what constituted the correct worship of the Lord,.

Exodus 20:22-26 And the LORD said to Moses, "Thus you shall say to the people of Israel: 'You have seen for yourselves that I have talked with you from heaven. (23) You shall not make gods of silver to be with me, nor shall you make for yourselves gods of gold. (24) An altar of earth you shall make for me and sacrifice on it your burnt offerings and your peace offerings, your sheep and your oxen. In every place where I cause my name to be remembered I will come to you and bless you. (25) If you make me an altar of stone, you shall not build it of hewn stones, for if you wield your tool on it you profane it. (26) And you shall not go up by steps to my altar, that your nakedness be not exposed on it.'

Exodus 22:28-31 "You shall not revile God, nor curse a ruler of your people. (29) "You shall not delay to offer from the fullness of your harvest and from the outflow of your presses. The firstborn of your sons you shall give to me. (30) You shall do the same with your oxen and with your sheep: seven days it shall be with its mother; on the eighth day you shall give it to me. (31) "You shall be consecrated to me. Therefore you shall not eat any flesh that is torn by beasts in the field; you shall throw it to the dogs.

Exodus 23:10-13 "For six years you shall sow your land and gather in its yield, (11) but the seventh year you shall let it rest and lie fallow, that the poor of your people may eat; and what they leave the

beasts of the field may eat. You shall do likewise with your vineyard, and with your olive orchard.

(12) "Six days you shall do your work, but on the seventh day you shall rest; that your ox and your donkey may have rest, and the son of your servant woman, and the alien, may be refreshed. (13) "Pay attention to all that I have said to you, and make no mention of the names of other gods, nor let it be heard on your lips.

9. How do these laws compare to our traditions and rules for worship?
10. All of the rules given in Exodus were to help the people live out their lives as God's holy people, but some of the rules also had practical implications as well. What practical reasons can you think of for the rules in 22:31 and 23:10–11?

What Does All of This Mean for Us?

It is quite evident that some of these instructions and laws simply do not apply to our world and to our current context. Rules about slavery are meaningless now, since slavery is outlawed. Punishment for crimes has been taken over by secular courts and is no longer a religious matter. The rules about ritual and worship were to guide the people until the coming of the Messiah. So how are we to treat these laws? Do they have any meaning for us?

It's important to remember that we are not bound by the civic or ceremonial laws of the Old Testament, because they were all fulfilled for us by Jesus! However, shortly after Jesus ascended into Heaven, a great controversy arose in His church concerning this very matter. Many Jews who had converted to Christianity were not certain how they and Gentile converts were to relate to Old Testament laws. They wanted to know if Christians were still to celebrate the festivals and keep the dietary laws given in Leviticus Chapter 11. How was their worship to reflect the ordinances of the Old Testament? Was the Sabbath still to be observed? The issue is treated a number of times in the New Testament. Let's see what Jesus has to say about it?

Mark 2:23-28 One Sabbath he was going through the grainfields, and as they made their way, his disciples began to pluck heads of grain. (24) And the Pharisees were saying to him, "Look, why are they doing what is not lawful on the Sabbath?" (25) And he said to them, "Have you never read what David did, when he was in need and was hungry, he and those who were with him: (26) how he entered the house of God, in the time of Abiathar the high priest, and ate the bread of the Presence, which it is not lawful for any but the priests to eat, and also gave it to those who were with him?" (27) And he said to them, "The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath. (28) So the Son of Man is lord even of the Sabbath."

11. What did Jesus mean by saying that the "Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath"? What does that say about a legalistic application of the Sabbath law like that prevalent in Jesus' day? What does Jesus' position as Lord of the Sabbath mean for our obligation to observe the Sabbath law?

How does St. Paul emphasize this same point in the following verses?

Colossians 2:16-17 Therefore let no one pass judgment on you in questions of food and drink, or with regard to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath. (17) These are a shadow of the things to come, but the substance belongs to Christ.

12. God's Word clearly teaches that our salvation is in Christ alone. The witness that we give, however (good or bad) does have an effect on others. The Scriptures often caution us not to abuse our Christian freedom. How much are we responsible for the way in which people view our way of living? In what way can our living be a negative witness? a positive witness?