

The Book of the Covenant

Exodus

By David Harr

sermonaudio.com

Bible Text: Exodus 20:22-23:19
Preached on: Sunday, June 27, 2010

Immanuel Orthodox Presbyterian Church
51 Wentwood Court
Medford, NJ 08055

Website: www.immanuelonline.org
Online Sermons: www.sermonaudio.com/immanuelopc

We are going to read just a few portions. If you looked in the bulletin you saw the passage listed there. This next section goes from chapter 20 verse 22 all the way to chapter 23 and to verse 19 of chapter 23. We are not going to read the whole thing, but it really is one section and we will look at it together. I will read just a couple of portions to give you the basic idea.

Starting in chapter 20 verse 22.

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. You shall not make gods of silver to be with me, nor shall you make for yourselves gods of gold. 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. 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. And you shall not go up by steps to my altar, that your nakedness be not exposed on it.’

“Now these are the rules that you shall set before them. When you buy a Hebrew slave, he shall serve six years, and in the seventh he shall go out free, for nothing.”¹

Now let’s skip ahead to chapter 21. We read verses 22 to 29.

“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. But if there is harm, then you shall pay life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, burn for burn, wound for wound, stripe for stripe.

¹ Exodus 20:22—21:2.

“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. If he knocks out the tooth of his slave, male or female, he shall let the slave go free because of his tooth.

“When an ox gores a man or a woman to death, the ox shall be stoned, and its flesh shall not be eaten, but the owner of the ox shall not be liable. But if the ox has been accustomed to gore in the past, and its owner has been warned but has not kept it in, and it kills a man or a woman, the ox shall be stoned, and its owner also shall be put to death.”²

We will stop there and move ahead and read the final portion in 23 starting in verse 14.

“Three times in the year you shall keep a feast to me. You shall keep the Feast of Unleavened Bread. As I commanded you, you shall eat unleavened bread for seven days at the appointed time in the month of Abib, for in it you came out of Egypt. None shall appear before me empty-handed. You shall keep the Feast of Harvest, of the firstfruits of your labor, of what you sow in the field. You shall keep the Feast of Ingathering at the end of the year, when you gather in from the field the fruit of your labor. Three times in the year shall all your males appear before the Lord GOD.

“You shall not offer the blood of my sacrifice with anything leavened, or let the fat of my feast remain until the morning.

“The best of the firstfruits of your ground you shall bring into the house of the LORD your God.

“You shall not boil a young goat in its mother’s milk.”³

End there the reading of God’s Word.

Have you ever determined that you were going to read through the entire Bible? You figured you are going to start Genesis one and you were going to work your way through Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, all the way to Revelation. Have you tried that? I bet you I can guess at the point where you started to slowdown, where you were tempted to skim a little bit, to skip forward, to go quickly. Right about here. The narrative portions in Genesis and then the first half of Exodus give way to a lot of legal material as we will see in the second half of the book of Exodus. Things start to slow down. And perhaps it starts to seem a bit boring, maybe irrelevant. And so we are tempted to kind of skip ahead.

² Exodus 21:22-29.

³ Exodus 23:17-19.

Well, in part because of that very reason that I want us to spend a little time in this second half of the book of Exodus. We will go much quicker than we did the first half, but I want us to look at it. Why has God put this stuff here?

We will see it is not... we have to make sure we apply it rightly. We are not ancient Israel and so, for example, a passage where... which deals with various laws about how Israel is to live as God's holy people in a political society that is ruled by God himself. We need to be careful to think: How do we apply that now in the New Testament age?

Now, we need to be careful not just to take out the word Israel and insert the word United States and think that they can just one to one correlation. You will get into a lot of trouble doing stuff like that. Not mean to be done exactly that way.

But yet it is not completely irrelevant. God has it here for us.

Well, why? Well, let's look at this passage, this section that we read from starting in the end of chapter 20 and going into the first chapter of chapter 23 is a section that Moses will call in chapter 24, he will call this section the book of the covenant. It is an exposition of God's covenant laws for his people. As now here they are coming out of the land of Egypt and are about to go into the Promised Land, here is how they are to live as God's holy people, as God's set apart people ruled by him.

There is a lot of similarities with the 10 Commandments, but yet some important differences, too. A lot of similarities. Some of the very same subject matters is dealt with here. A lot of this legal material deals with things that are dealt with in the 10 Commandments, things like worship, murder, stealing, false witness, the sabbath. Only the material here is much more expansive and much more specific. And so in the 10 Commandments we had broad principles, like, "Do not murder." And here we get specific application of things like what do you do and when an ox gores someone. Is that murder? Well, we will get into the specifics to know how to think about that particular example.

In many ways you could see the book of the covenant as kind of an exposition, an explanation, an application of the 10 Commandments. In fact, much of the material and some of the application that we talked about when we looked at the 10 Commandments came from this. I quoted this section quite a bit when we looked at the 10 Commandments.

So we can go through it a little quicker. We won't go through it in great detail.

What you have here in this section, this book of the covenant is what we could call case law, very specific cases are given. And the idea is not to name every single possibility, but give representative cases so that you can, by extrapolation apply it to the scenario. So you have a case in what do you do with an ox that is accustomed go gore people and its owner is negligent.

Well, you could see that the same principle would apply if you had a donkey that was particularly dangerous even though it doesn't mention donkeys specifically. You apply. That is the idea of case law. He extrapolates different situations.

But the idea is here is God's people setting up a society under the rule of God and they are setting up that society to live out this covenant with Moses between God and God's people through Moses set up there on Sinai.

So what are some general principles we could draw out of here? Again, we are not living in identical situation. God isn't in covenant relationship with the United States. In fact, the much more direct application would be thinking of the Church as a community and society, though we are not a political community and so we can't draw exact parallels.

But what are some general observations that we can pull out of his passage? I think that is probably the best way to approach it? What are some principles that we see laid down here for God's people, again, called to live this set apart life?

Well, a couple of things we notice. I will make just three observations.

First, that worship is central. This passage, this book of the covenant, the explanation of here is what you are going to live like as God's people in the land, it begins and it ends with worship, regulations about the worship of God. It begins and ends with worship.

In the beginning of chapter 20 verse 22 it is regulations about altars and what you are supposed to... what kind of altar you are supposed to have and how you are not supposed to make idols. At the end it ends with worship festivals of the year. But there at the beginning at the end this teaching, worship is the foundation... it is where it begins and it ends. The structure is intentional. This is to be Israel's identity. Everything they do is to be focused around their worship of God. They were set free out of Egypt, free from slavery under Pharaoh to be servants of God, worshippers of God and now this marks who they are. They are worshippers.

And, of course, that is our identity, too, in fact, even more. We who have been set free from a greater slavery, slavery is sin, and now our identity as God's people, free from a greater Exodus is to be worshippers. We even saw it as we were reading Revelation 21 tonight, didn't we? What are we going to spend all eternity in? There is that picture of the nations coming in bringing in their glory. All right? The picture is one of worshippers streaming into the great city. There is no temple there, but the worshippers gathered around God himself. That is their... the identity of God's people. And we start that now.

That is who we are.

You can just think of how worship structures our time. And here we are. We begin every week beginning with worship, even throughout the week we gather as families, as

individuals. We worship. It structures our time, our life. It is a part of who we are. We are to be worshippers. And here this passage challenges us to remember that identity.

The other thing we see here in this material, this legal material, a good principle we could pull from it is that Exodus fuels ethics. In other words, what God had done in delivering them out of Egypt now was supposed to be applied in how they lived day to day as a people. It comes up throughout this passage that the Exodus was supposed to speak directly to how they lived. What I read in chapter 21 about slaves, for example, it plays in there.

Now we don't have time to do a full teaching on how the Bible teaches about slavery. That is sort of a real big topic. We can't say everything tonight. Perhaps one quick comment is we could say that we shouldn't necessarily assume that just because the Bible mentions a practice and even gives permission for it, it doesn't mean that God is thrilled with it or it is his ultimate intention.

Think of other examples like divorce or polygamy. These things were permitted for a time, but we clearly know God is not thrilled with them. It is not his intention.

The other thing which we can notice here as we read about the regulations regarding slaves is that the feel of slavery here is something very, very different than what existed in the Antebellum South, very, very different. More direct the application, actually, or direct the principle is it was something very, very different than what existed in Egypt. They had been delivered from a slavery, a slavery where as a people they were being oppressed. Remember back in chapter one and two? The intention of Pharaoh was to oppress them as a people, to not merely use them—though that was part of it—but also to wipe them out, to oppress them as a people.

And now what you have regulated here is something very, very different. It has an economic purpose. In that sense it is the word in our mind slavery probably has the wrong connotation. It is more something akin to what we would call indentured servitude where someone if they got into economic crises couldn't declare bankruptcy. You could sell yourself into slavery for a time.

Notice the regulation. Six years, that was the limit. You were a slave for six years. Then you were free. No ransom had to be paid. You could commit yourself to staying if you wanted, but there was a limit.

And the idea was you were slaves in Egypt, an oppressive, cruel slavery. And now if you have Hebrew slaves among you, you would be treated quite differently to be a different feel all together, one where justice rules and mercy rules. And so you see that idea where the Exodus and the deliverance of God is supposed to fuel how they lived in society.

Another example of that comes up in chapter 22 and verse 21.

You shall not wrong a sojourner or oppress him, for you were sojourners in the land of Egypt. You shall not mistreat any widow or fatherless child. If you do mistreat them, and they cry out to me, I will surely hear their cry, and my wrath will burn, and I will kill you with the sword, and your wives shall become widows and your children fatherless.⁴

Directly comes out and states it that you are to be kind to the sojourner among you. Why? Because you were sojourners in Egypt. You were aliens. You were strangers in a foreign land in Egypt. And so now when you are in your own land and there are strangers among you, you are to treat them with justice and with honor. Don't oppress them or mistreat them even if they are far away from their home and you could technically get away with it. Because remember what God brought you out of.

So the deliverance of God now was to affect how they lived as a society.

Now how do we think about this with us? Well, we are not in exactly the same political or social situation, but we see in the New Testament, the New Testament writers doing very similar things. our deliverance affects how we live. Think of Paul's words in Ephesians four as he is talking about how we live as a society, as the body of Christ. He is applying our deliverance. And he says in Ephesians 4:32, "Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you."⁵

It is the same idea. You were enslaved. God set you free. God forgave you and now that Exodus, that deliverance affects how you treat one another. You have to live it out. And we live it out. Paul gives us a specific example. We are kind. We are gracious. We are forgiving.

So you think of that other believer who you do find frustrating. And you need to even picture a face. And they are just difficult. They rub you the wrong way. You are tempted to be snippier with them than you might be with others. How are you supposed to live out relationship with them?

Well, God says, "Remember your exodus. Remember how God forgave you in Christ." And that mercy, that tender hearted... now you live that out in your daily ethics.

And so as opposed to being harsh or gossiping or being angry, live out tenderness and love even beyond what this person might even show you.

Exodus fuels ethics.

One last principle, justice befits God's people.

Much of the material here deals with social justice. And, again, part of it because they are setting up a society. They are setting up a political and legal, civil system. And so there is

⁴ Exodus 22:21-24.

⁵ Ephesians 4:32.

a lot of regulations about justice. But it is more than just, well, we need some rules to keep things... keep everyone from killing one another. They are supposed to do it in such a way that fits with God. And so we were reading some of this material. Here is a passage we didn't read from chapter 23 verse six.

You shall not pervert the justice due to your poor in his lawsuit. Keep far from a false charge, and do not kill the innocent and righteous, for I will not acquit the wicked. And you shall take no bribe, for a bribe blinds the clear-sighted and subverts the cause of those who are in the right.⁶

And then it goes on to say... talking about oppressing the sojourner, "for you were sojourners."⁷

Again, what was to mark this new civil society? It was to be a concern for justice. It wasn't to be perverted. And so when it came to lawsuits, it wasn't just don't like, don't bear false witness because it is the right thing to do because you are God's holy people. God loves justice.

Even the same goes with punishments for sin. There is a lot of regulations here about what happens when someone does wrong. What kind of punishment?

Well, the principle is, well, justice must be done. And so you go to chapter 22, for example, the first verse.

"If a man steals an ox or a sheep, and kills it or sells it, he shall repay five oxen for an ox, and four sheep for a sheep."⁸

The principle of justice and paying back if you steal. Again, to have a society that fits God and his love for justice.

You might think of the New Testament example of Zacchaeus. Remember Zacchaeus? And he was a cheat, a thief as a tax collector, charging too much, getting rich. Do you remember what he promised as Christ comes into his house and by picture there into his life? What does Zacchaeus promise? I am going to pay back four times what I took.

Where did he get that number? He got it from here. Not because the laws of the Roman governor mandated it, because he had this sense that no justice, if I have stolen I have to pay back and then some in order to honor God.

Even think of this passage, this much quoted passage from the book of the covenant of, "eye for eye, tooth for tooth,"⁹ sometimes called the law of retaliation, Latin, *lex talionis* if you like Latin terms.

⁶ Exodus 23:6-8.

⁷ Exodus 23:9.

⁸ Exodus 22:1.

⁹ Exodus 21:24.

But you think, when is that usually quoted in our day and age? Eye for an eye, tooth for a tooth. Usually the implication is that is... when you want to declare something harsh and when you want to declare something mean and just over the top. Oh, that is just an eye for an eye.

But actually the context is somewhat different.

The point is justice. And the specific example was the one that I read there in chapter 22. Men striving together and in their anger and their foolishness, someone gets hurt. There is a woman, a pregnant woman, if she gets hurt or her child, unborn child gets hurt, well, what principle fits how you deal with that situation?

Well justice has to be done. Life can't just be shuffled off. And so we are given this principle. And it is a principle that is supposed to be measured justice, paying back for the damage that was done.

So it is not vigilante justice. It is not over the top justice. Revenge and, you know, paying back and then some, nor is it the guilty getting off on a technicality.

You see, the idea God is a God of justice and so God's people are to live justly before one another. And, again, when we could have all kinds of interesting discussions about to what degree are our own American laws to live out this principle? Sometimes they do. Sometimes they don't. But the principle as God's people, as we think about the Church and as we think about those people God puts us before and the roles he has called us to live out in the world, we are to be a people who love justice, carrying for the needs around us because we wear the name of Christ. We have been those who have been set free.

In fact, our very freedom, our very exodus is based on justice, isn't it? Isn't that our salvation? It is based on God being just. And so he sends his Son in order to save us, to receive that just punishment for sin which we deserve. He gets the punishment. We go free. How does Paul explain it?

“So that [God] might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus,”¹⁰
Romans three.

And our salvation is based on the fact that God is a just God, that God can't now turn around to us who have faith in Christ and say, “You know what? You have just annoyed me one too many times. Ok, my Son died for you, but after that, you know what? I am going to get you back now.”

He can't do that. He won't do that. Why? Because he is a just God.

¹⁰ Romans 3:26.

And so our very salvation is secured. We can be safe. God will never turn upon us because God is a just God.

And now the implication is now we live out lives of justice and mercy towards one another and as God gives us opportunity in the world, because we know of our own salvation and our own freedom.

Well, there is much more that we could say, but hopefully you get the idea. Though we are not ancient Israel there is much more here than just something to slow you down in your Bible, just kind of a boring section. Hopefully you see the idea. God and who he is and what he is doing is to be lived out in daily life. We need to do the thinking of what does it look like to serve God not just on a Sunday, but on a Monday morning and a Thursday. What should guide us? Well, principles like these, worship is central. Our exodus should fuel our ethics and justice befits God's people.

Let's pray.

Lord, we pray that you would help us to live as those set apart, called out. Lord, we pray that you would help us to have a better sense of what you have done in setting us free and that we would show that to the world as we live out our freedom in a way that speaks of mercy and tenderness and love and care. Father, give us the wisdom to do that in our own callings. You know where we will be tomorrow and the next day. And so give us grace to live it out we pray in Jesus' name.

Well, let's close tonight... What's our final hymn here? I can't find mine either.

[off mic voice]

There you go, 565.

[music]