

The Parties You Have to Go To

Exodus 23:10-19

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If you have your Bibles I'd invite you to turn with me to Exodus chapter 23. Tonight we come to the penultimate message in this series on the book of the covenant. We started all the way back in Exodus 20, immediately after the 10 commandments with that section beginning in verse 22 which is the formal beginning of the book of the covenant. At the beginning of chapter 21 we got into the laws of the book of the covenant. Tonight we study the last section of laws in the book of the covenant. There's one more section to go before we get to Exodus 24, but that is a section in which God reiterates His purposes to fulfill His promises to the children of Israel in bringing them into the land of Canaan and driving out the Canaanites before them. And as such, it's a section of promises, whereas this is yet another section of commands.

This "Book of the Covenant" is the name given to this section of scripture by Moses just a few verses forward from here in Exodus 24:7 and it refers to the applications of the Ten Commandments to Israel in their specific needs and in the specific time of the wilderness and prior to the entry into the land of Canaan. But we have already said as we've studied it together that there are principles here that are universally applicable; there are things that are for us in our daily lives. We've already seen a range of issues taken up: worship, slavery, laws on murder and manslaughter, laws on the death penalty, laws about bodily injuries, laws about equitable penalties in punishment of crimes, laws about theft and negligence, restitution and seduction, serious societal capital crimes have been addressed, how we are to care for strangers, widows, and orphans, lending to the needy, respect for rulers, giving to God the first fruits of our harvests, ceremonial consecration to God, directives against sinful bias or favoritism or partiality, whether it's in the courts or in our neighbor relationships or in influential leaders of the community.

And having looked at all that sort of variety of laws, tonight we come to a section that applies, really, the first through the fourth commandments, and especially the fourth commandment to Israel, to the cycle of life in Israel. It's in a categorical form; this section addresses the soil Sabbath, allowing the land to lie fallow every seven years, but it also addresses the weekly Sabbath, loyalty to the Lord, and the three great festivals and particulars about sacrificing in those festivals. So

let's hear God's word in Exodus 23, beginning in verse 10:

Our Lord and our God, we thank You for Your word and we ask that You would teach us from it that we might behold wonderful things from Your law. By Your Spirit grant that we would hear and receive and do Your truth. In Jesus' name, Amen.

In this passage we learn at least three things: in verses 10-12, we learn about the sabbatical cycle of life in Israel; in verse 13 we find a summarization, a crystallization of the whole of the laws in the book of the covenant; and in verses 14-19 we gain instruction about these mandatory celebrations, these parties that Israel had to go to. And in each of these things there are important lessons for us today. But I want to take those a little bit out of consecutive order; I actually want you to begin with verse 13, then we'll go to verses 10-12, and then we'll look at verses 14-19.

I. In this summarizing directive, we see the reiteration of God's concern for His people's obedience and loyalty.

Let's begin with verse 13 because this verse is the culminating point of all the laws that have been given since the giving of the Ten Commandments. It's the climax of the laws in the book of the covenant; from Exodus 20:22-23:13 we come to the climax of the book of the covenant. It can be summarized in two pages, here it is, here's the summarization: guard the laws and forget the gods. Guard the laws and forget the gods. You see, in this summarizing verse, we have a directive from God. It is a reiteration of God's concern for His people to be obedient and loyal; guard the laws, be obedient; forget the names of the gods, don't let them even be on your lips, be loyal. Obedience and loyalty.

You remember this covenant code, this book of the covenant, began back in chapter 20 and in verse 22. Would you turn with me there. I want you to see where these laws began. As soon as the Ten Commandments are over, as soon as God has made His words of warning after the giving of the Ten Commandments, you come to Exodus 20:22 and you read this: "Then the Lord said to Moses, 'Thus you shall say to the sons of Israel, "You yourselves have seen that I have spoken to you from heaven. You shall not make other gods beside Me.'" He goes right back to the first commandment. Only a few verses before, He had given the first commandment, but now in this section of the application of the Ten Commandments He starts right out with the first commandment again. Well, guess where He ends up in His law? Right back at the first commandment: forget the gods; forget those other gods; forget the false gods; forget the gods of the Egyptians; forget the gods of your forefather, Abraham, because he was the son of an idolater coming out of Ur of the Chaldees; forget the gods of the Canaanites; remember Me! So the section of the application of God's Ten Words to the daily life of Israel began with the first

commandment and guess where it ends? Right back at the first commandment.

It makes sense doesn't it? Jesus said, "Here is the first commandment: to love the Lord your God with all your heart and all your soul and all your strength and all your mind." Well here is Moses reiterating this very point. And that's why John Currid can call this verse the climax of the book of the covenant; it's not only towards the end of it, but it summarizes one of the great emphases, certainly the first emphasis, of the book of the covenant. So we begin with this first verse. There are 2 parts of this verse, verse 13: guard the laws that God has given to you. You might not get it from the way it reads in your English, "Be on your guard." The "be on your guard" refers back to the phrase that occurs before it. Look at the phrase before it, "Now concerning everything which I have said to you, be on your guard." In other words, "Pay close attention to the laws that I have given to you." Moses is reminding us here, God is saying to us here that we are to be faithful to His commands. That's how we show that we love the Lord our God.

Then he goes on to say in the second part of the verse, "and do not mention the name of other gods nor let them be heard from your mouth." In other words, "Forget the false gods, don't even name them." As we said, this verse returns to the themes of the first section of the book of the covenant. Allow your eyes to look at Exodus 20:22-26. Scan through those verses and notice this: in verse 24, in giving His instructions about the making of alters, God says this, "In every place where I cause My name to be remembered, I will come to you and bless you." So God says when you are faithful to approach Him as He has commanded, He will cause His name to be remembered there and He will meet with you. But at the end of the book of the covenant, He says, "Though My name will be remembered, I want you to forget the names of the false gods." And you see this obsession with the first commandment from the beginning to the end of the book of the covenant. You see we find here a reiteration of God's concern for His people's obedience and loyalty. Loyalty to the one true God is shown in obeying His law and refusing to bow the knee to a false god. And you know history is filled with the stories of believers in the Old Testament and the New who did just that. You don't have to think very long for examples of them. There's Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego who in a strange culture faced this test: either disobey your God and name and remember and worship false gods or die; those are your options. And what did they choose to do? To obey God and to refuse to name, to remember, to worship false gods. And in that case, God spared them. But they were ready to die. Daniel was in the same circumstance: either you don't pray to your God and you do pray to the king, or you're due capital punishment. And Daniel chooses to obey God and to pray to God and not to pray to the king and to disobey his law, and God spares him.

But He doesn't always do that. We think today of Muslims in an indigenous culture that convert to Christ and receive water baptism and it's discovered and they are sent to their deaths. You see, it's still going on around us all over;

believers who are determined to obey God and to refuse to bow the knee to a false god, and they pay the price. Loyalty to the one true God is shown in one's refusal to bow the knee to another and in one's obedience to His law. That's something for us to learn today and we learn it right here in this summarizing verse in the book of the covenant, Exodus 23:13.

II. In order to promote obedience and loyalty to God, He wove Himself into the weekly/yearly schedule of Israel.

There's a second thing I want you to see, though. In verses 10-12, we see how God has woven Himself into the very rhythm of weekly life in Israel and how trusting God for provision and sustenance is woven into the yearly calendar of Israel. In verses 10-12, we have a section that reflects the oldest sacred calendar in the Scriptures. It's based on the calendar of creation; a seven-day cycle. The foundations of this calendar derive from the creation days. Verses 10 and 11 deal with the seven-yearly Sabbath; verse 12 deals with the weekly Sabbath. But the weekly Sabbath is central not only to the seven-year cycle of Sabbath observance which is spoken of in verses 10 and 11, but it is also central to all three festivals that are going to be talked about in verses 14-19.

Did you realize that all three of those festivals are on a weekly calendar culminating on the Sabbath? So fundamental to all of Israel's religious observance is that seven-day Sabbath cycle. In verses 10 and 11, we are told that every seven years that Israel is to allow the land, the fields, to lie fallow. Now we know that agriculturally speaking, that's a good practice, especially when you don't have fertilizer. But that's not the reason Israel is told to do it here. In fact, Israel is told to do this: look at verse 11, "because of the benefit this will give to needy humans and to animals." What's the point? The point is: God is a provider that is concerned about needy and even about the wild beasts of the field. You remember how often the psalms celebrate that fact? "They open their mouths and you give them food in due season," the psalmist says. Jesus can say that he is concerned even for the birds and provision for them. And this fact is celebrated in this law in Exodus 23:11: God is the provider for all of His creatures.

You may wonder, "How do you get that from a law?" Look at the previous laws. Just allow your eyes to scan back up, just a few verses, back in to verses 1-9. How do you get from laws on treatment of the oppressed and widows and orphans and strangers to laws about seven-year Sabbaths and weekly Sabbaths? Well look at the connection. The seven-year Sabbath has as part of its design the care of the needy. So God moves in verses 1-9 from laws about how we're to care for the needy to a law about how He is going to care for the needy, through us.

And then in verse 12, we see that God's work and rest in creation is the paradigm for man's work and rest each week. Israel's fundamental calendar, you see, is

not based on astronomical movements, the stars or even the seasons, ultimately, although there is a correlation between two of their great feasts and significant parts of the agricultural season. Ultimately that calendar is not astronomically or seasonally based; it's sabbatically based. The calendar of Israel is based on the creational rotation; the seven-day cycle is the fundamental part of Israel's calendar. And even that seven-day cycle presses Israel to trust in God.

You think of it: you come from a nomadic culture and a primitive agricultural culture; to stop work for one day is to risk death and to do so forces you to trust God. If you're going to stop work for one day, and certainly if you're going to allow a field to lie fallow for one year, you are really testing your chances, if I can speak like an Arminian for a minute. You have to trust God to do that, and isn't that the whole point? The very cycle of worship presses the believer to trust God that He will provide, and we'll see this celebrated over and over in the feasts that we're going to look at in just a few moments.

But I want you to see this: God, by weaving Himself into the weekly calendar of Israel has shown to Israel how integral He is to them. And correspondingly, their schedules show the priority of God in their lives. God, if I can put it this way, interrupts the rhythm of life every seven days and He says, "That's my Day." And in that way we see something of their priority.

You know, your schedule tells you something about your priorities. During the last election campaign people were fascinated by a Jewish vice-presidential candidate who would not campaign on Saturdays; that was fascinating to them. You see, the Christian Lord's Day is so alien to most people today, they didn't realize that that was something that we do too. This was a very strange thing: a person that wouldn't do stuff once every seven days. But you know, what it said to you was that Joe Lieberman's faith was important to him, that being the Vice President of the United States was not more important to him than being a follower of his religion. It said something about his priorities.

A few years back you may have followed the story of a Jewish boy who was incredibly good in basketball. Now you know there are all sorts of jokes about Jewish sports heroes. Have you ever seen those blank books, you know it says on the cover The Hall of Fame of Jewish Sports Heroes, and then you open it up and there's nobody in it. Jewish folks and sports heroes generally are not the things you put together, but this guy was known as the Jewish Michael Jordan, and the University of Maryland was recruiting him heavily; they wanted him to play on the team. And the University of Maryland's coach even offered to change the entire basketball schedule for the University of Maryland so that they never played a basketball game after sundown on Friday night or before sundown on Saturday night. Now they'd never do that for a Christian, by the way. But this young man was prepared not to receive a college scholarship to a major university unless they would accommodate the fact that he wasn't going to play on the Shavat. Your schedule tells you something about your priorities. You learn

that in the story of Eric Liddel who refuses to run a race that he almost certainly would have won and gotten a gold medal for at the Olympics in the 1920's.

Your schedule tells you something about your priorities and God has woven Himself into the rhythm of His people's life in the Old Testament and in the New. That weekly cycle hasn't gone away, that seven-day cycle is still a part of Christian experience. The Lord's Day is a different day because it's a day of resurrection, but every seven days Christians around the world celebrate that resurrection on the Lord's Day. And I want to say that Protestantism cannot survive without that Lord's Day; it is our fundamental calendar.

III. In order to promote Israel's trust in His providence and gratitude for His redemption, God wove Himself into the cycle of the year.

One last thing we see in this passage. In verses 14-19: the parties that you have to go to. You were wondering where that title came from; I normally have boring titles and you were really wondering where that title came from. That's where it comes from, these mandatory pilgrim festivals of God's redemption and provision and the festivals are here summarized and enumerated. Let me say again that the foundation for each of them is the seven-day week climaxed on a Sabbath.

Look at each of these three festivals, one in verse 15, two in verse 16: the Feast of Unleavened Bread, verse 15; the Feast of the Harvest, first part of verse 16; and the Feast of Ingathering, verse 16. Now if you're like me, the Old Testament feasts confuse you; the names confuse you because you find one name in the Old Testament and then you get to the New Testament, "Well, hold on, I don't see Pentecost listed here." You're right, you don't see it listed here because Pentecost was the term that the Greek-speaking Jews used to identify one of the three feasts here.

Let me do some correlation for you. The Feast of Unleavened Bread is the feast that memorializes the Exodus. So the Passover feast is part of the Feast of Unleavened Bread and at that Feast of Unleavened Bread, the those who came out during the Exodus remembered, and that means that Israel remembers that God redeemed her. Israel remembers that God chose her; Israel remembers that God redeemed her because of His faithfulness to the covenant. That's what happens at the Feast of Unleavened Bread.

Then verse 16, the Feast of Harvest: that feast is later in the Old Testament itself called the Feast of Weeks, and it is that Feast of Harvest which is called by Greek-speaking Jews Pentecost. It is a celebration of first fruits. It's an acknowledgement at the very beginning of the agricultural cycle by giving back to God that He is the one who gave to you in the first place. In other words, it's a celebration of God's providence; He's our provider. So the Feast of Unleavened Bread, God is our Redeemer; the Feast of Harvest, God is our Provider.

Third feast is the Feast of Ingathering. Now that's the feast that is later called the Feast of Tabernacles. It's at the end of the agricultural year and it commemorates God's sustaining providence; He's brought you through to the end of the year and it especially remembers God's provision for the children of Israel all the way through the wilderness and into the Promised Land. It commemorates God's sustaining providence.

And there are four stipulations given about each of these feasts and I want to point you to those four stipulations. One is in verse 15 and three are in verses 17-19. At the end of verse 15 what words do you read? At the end of verse 15 we read, "And none shall appear before Me empty-handed." That is a stipulation for all the feasts; to come without offering is to despise God's providence, with ingratitude for what He's provided. "So don't come before Me empty-handed," God says. There's your directive to come to me in these feasts, don't come empty-handed because I have not left you empty-handed. Doesn't that speak to stewardship today? Don't come to Me empty-handed, I haven't left you empty-handed.

Secondly notice this: in verse 17, "Three times a year all your males shall appear before the Lord your God." Now we know from Deuteronomy and later that not just males were at these festivals; wives, women, children, infants even, came to these great festivals. But notice the emphasis: "Three times a year all your males shall appear before Me." You see, as far as God is concerned, heads of families have special responsibility in the propagation of spiritual life in Israel, and so it's emphasized: the heads of family, the males, the men of fighting age, the ones who have household responsibility and governance, they are to be here and appear before Me.

Thirdly, look at verse 18, "You shall not offer the blood of My sacrifice with leavened bread." In other words, the leaven laws, you remember them, it's been a long time since we were in Exodus 10-12. Remember the laws about removing the leaven before the feast of the Passover, because leaven was a symbol of corruption and to worship with leaven in the house was to worship with corruption. It was symbolic of corruption; it had to be rooted out before we could come into the presence of God. Well here we're told, "Don't you come and offer a bloody sacrifice without cleaning the leaven out of your house."

And then one final strange stipulation. At the end of verse 19, "You are not to boil a young goat in the milk of its mother." Who would do such a cruel thing? The Canaanites; it was part of one of their fertility rituals in worship of one of their deities. And what's God saying to the children of Israel? Don't you act like the Canaanites in worship; don't you get your ideas of how to worship from them. You get them from Me; don't look at them and say, "You know that would be a really cool thing to do." No, you worship, don't you do the things the Canaanites say.

What do we learn from this? We learn four things: we learn that we must worship with gratitude. Don't come to the Lord with empty hands. Worship with gratitude to the one who has given you every good gift. We learn that covenant heads have first order responsibilities for their families. That's why dads can say, "I don't care if you want to come, you're coming." Because we'll give an account, we're responsible. We are to worship without corruption; the leaven is to be cleaned out before the sacrifice is offered. The psalmist could put it this way, "Who can ascend into the hill of the Lord? He who has clean hands and a pure heart." Jesus could put it this way, "If you are on the way to worship and you remember that your neighbor has something against you, go be reconciled to him before you come to worship." We are to worship without corruption and we are to worship without emulation.

We don't emulate the world in our worship; we learn our worship from God. God calls for that worship, God specifies that worship, and we give Him the glory due His name in the way that He has told us to give Him the glory due His name. All of those things we learn from the book of the covenant. May God bless His word, let's pray.

Heavenly Father, we thank You for your unchanging word and though unchanging, ever fresh, ever refreshing, ever applicable, ever challenging, ever comforting, ever strengthening. Grant that we would hear it and love it and live it. In Jesus' name, Amen

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