

Exodus 23
November 16, 2014

Open with Prayer

HOOK:

If you weren't here last week, I suggested that learning all of the extra ordinances that the Israelites had to know was like going to an orientation meeting at a new job. When you first get hired on, you attend an orientation meeting to learn rules about dress code, benefits, company mission statement, values, etc. Some of you may have fought to stay awake at those meetings, while others of you learned so much information that it felt like you were drinking out of a fire hose.

The Israelites are going through a similar orientation meeting. They are hearing from God how He expects them to behave. He has already issued the Ten Commandments, and now all of these ordinances are expounding on them. God's intent is to teach the Israelites how to be God's treasured possession, a royal priesthood, a holy nation. These poor Israelites are just trying to wrap their mind around how they are to conduct themselves.

Transition: Just like last week, I am inviting you to pretend you are an Israelite who has shown up for a long Orientation Meeting. Since we are a part of the family of God, we are a part of His royal priesthood, so let's apply the principles and values that we will learn today so that our conduct reflects honor and glory to God. Let's begin.

BOOK (NIV 1984): [Read Exodus 23:1-9]

V.1:

- “Do not spread false reports. Do not help a wicked man by being a malicious witness.

V.2:

- “Do not follow the crowd in doing wrong. When you give testimony in a lawsuit, do not pervert justice by siding with the crowd,

V.3:

- and do not show favoritism to a poor man in his lawsuit.

V.4:

- “If you come across your enemy's ox or donkey wandering off, be sure to take it back to him.

V.5:

- If you see the donkey of someone who hates you fallen down under its load, do not leave it there; be sure you help him with it.

V.6:

- “Do not deny justice to your poor people in their lawsuits.

V.7:

- Have nothing to do with a false charge and do not put an innocent or honest person to death, for I will not acquit the guilty.

V.8:

- “Do not accept a bribe, for a bribe blinds those who see and twists the words of the righteous.

V.9:

- “Do not oppress an alien; you yourselves know how it feels to be aliens, because you were aliens in Egypt.

Observations/Process Questions:

- Since we’re at an “orientation meeting,” there is no easy way to package these ordinances, so we will go through them one by one to make sure we understand what has been asked of the Israelites!
- Observation: It seems like these nine verses all answer this question: “What does God-honoring behavior look like?”
- Q: Let’s look at v.1(a), which expounds on the ninth commandment, “Do not lie (do not bear false witness).” What principles do you see God implementing in this rule? [1. Don’t intentionally spread a false report or rumor. 2. In general, we probably shouldn’t spread any report unless we know for certain it’s true.]
- Q: V.1(b) – What is an example of helping a wicked man by being a malicious witness?
- Q: V.2 – What is an example of following the crowd in doing wrong? [Participating in a riot?]
- Q: What do you think it means when the Bible says, “When giving testimony in a lawsuit do not pervert justice by siding with the crowd?” [If the crowd is doing something wrong, don’t succumb to the pressure of following the crowd.]
- Q: V.3 – This seems odd. What is meant by not showing favoritism to a poor man in his lawsuit? [Impartiality is just that. You don’t show favoritism because of social class.]
- Q: V.4, 5 – What’s the principle being taught in these rules? [Kindness to others is expected, even if it involves your enemy, or legal adversary]
- Q: V.6, 7 – I love this language “Have *nothing to do* with a false charge...” That is strong language.
- Q: V. 8 – What is the danger of a bribe according to v.8? [It skews objectivity]
- Observation V.9 – God reminds them not to oppress the alien and to look at them with *empathy* because the Israelites already know what it feels like to be oppressed.
- Q: What values do you see God expressing in the rules we’ve looked at so far? [Integrity, Be truthful, impartiality - regardless of crowds, social status, etc.]

[Read Exodus 23:10-19]

V.10:

- “For six years you are to sow your fields and harvest the crops,

V.11:

- but during the seventh year let the land lie unplowed and unused. Then the poor among your people may get food from it, and the wild animals may eat what they leave. Do the same with your vineyard and your olive grove.

V.12:

- “Six days do your work, but on the seventh day do not work, so that your ox and your donkey may rest and the slave born in your household, and the alien as well, may be refreshed.

V.13:

- “Be careful to do everything I have said to you. Do not invoke the names of other gods; do not let them be heard on your lips.
- V.14:
- “Three times a year you are to celebrate a festival to me.
- V.15:
- “Celebrate the Feast of Unleavened Bread; for seven days eat bread made without yeast, as I commanded you. Do this at the appointed time in the month of Abib, for in that month you came out of Egypt. No one is to appear before me empty-handed.”
- V.16:
- “Celebrate the Feast of Harvest with the firstfruits of the crops you sow in your field.
 - “Celebrate the Feast of Ingathering at the end of the year, when you gather in your crops from the field.
- V.17:
- “Three times a year all the men are to appear before the Sovereign LORD.
- V.18:
- “Do not offer the blood of a sacrifice to me along with anything containing yeast.
 - “The fat of my festival offerings must not be kept until morning.
- V.19:
- “Bring the best of the firstfruits of your soil to the house of the LORD your God.
 - “Do not cook a young goat in its mother’s milk.

Observations/Process Questions:

- Q: How much premium does God put on rest? [It’s so important to Him that He made it a law to rest, including man, animals, and the land!]
- Q: I am going to assume that all of us will intellectually agree that rest is important. But if we took a closer look at our lives, how important is rest to us – really? [Let people engage with the question]
- Q: Why does it seem to be so hard? And if it is hard, what does that tell us? [If the answer is we’re doing too much, then why aren’t we slowing down or eliminating activities?]
- Q: V.11 – I love this verse. Who are the benefactors of leaving a field unplowed and unused in the 7th year? The poor FIRST, the wild animals second. The poor aren’t paying for the crops.
- Q: Let’s see who our farmers are: If the fields are unplowed, and no new seeds are sown, how is it that the poor and wild animals can feed on it? [There’s a special name for “random” crops that come up.]
- Q: V.12 – Who are the benefactors when we choose to obey God by resting on the 7th day? [The issue of rest is not about us. When we rest, we are taking care of others, i.e. animals, servants, and aliens]
- Q: V.13 – How serious do you think God is?! [Very! “Be careful” to do everything I say to do.]
- Observation: V. 14–19 – God wants His children to celebrate three feasts each year. So let’s make sure we understand what is being celebrated.
- Q: What is the Feast of Unleavened Bread? [Was celebrated for seven days after Passover. It was a memorial to the hasty Exodus from **Egypt** (cf. 12:15–20). Remember that right before the exodus out of Egypt, the Israelites were to prepare unleavened bread

to sustain themselves during the journey. So God wants them to remember this incredible delivery from slavery.]

- Q: What was the Feast of the Harvest? [In the spring at the beginning of the wheat harvest (cf. 34:22) when **the firstfruits of the crops** were to be given to the Lord. The Israelites baked two loaves made of new grain were presented to the Lord (Lev. 23:15–21), was also called the Feast of Weeks (Ex. 34:22) because it was celebrated seven weeks (50 days) after the Feast of Unleavened Bread]
- Q: What is the Feast of the Ingathering? [At **the end of the** agricultural or civil **year**— was also called the Feast of Tabernacles or Feast of Booths (Lev. 23:33–36; Deut. 16:13–15; 31:10)]
- V.19 Commentary: The prohibition against cooking **a young goat in its mother’s milk** (23:19; cf. 34:26; Deut. 14:21) may have been because of religious practices in which the Canaanites cooked goats in their mother’s milk in a fertility rite. God did not want His people to partake of anything related to idolatrous worship. Or the prohibition may have been against the inhumane treatment of young goats.
- Summary: These were constant reminders to Israel of God’s provisions for His people. So **three times a year** (Ex. 23:14, 17; 34:23) **all** adult males in Israel were supposed to worship at the tabernacle (or later, at the temple) with grain and animal offerings. When an offering was consumed on the altar it had to be without **yeast**. Only **the best of the crops’ firstfruits** were to be given to the Lord.

[Read Ex 23:20-33]

V.20:

- “See, I am sending an angel ahead of you to guard you along the way and to bring you to the place I have prepared. [Commentary: The **angel** (vv. 20, 23) may have been a special guardian angel for Israel (perhaps Michael, Dan. 12:1) or, more likely, the Lord Himself or the pre-incarnate Christ (cf. Gen. 24:7 with Gen. 24:27)]

V.21:

- “Pay attention to him and listen to what he says. Do not rebel against him; he will not forgive your rebellion, since my Name is in him.”

V.22:

- If you listen carefully to what he says and do all that I say, I will be an enemy to your enemies and will oppose those who oppose you.

V.23:

- “My angel will go ahead of you and bring you into the land of the Amorites, Hittites, Perizzites, Canaanites, Hivites, and Jebusites, and I will wipe them out.”

V.24:

- Do not bow down before their gods or worship them or follow their practices. You must demolish them and break their sacred stones to pieces.

V.25:

- Worship the Lord your God, and his blessing will be on your food and water. I will take away sickness from among you,

V.26:

- and none will miscarry or be barren in your land. I will give you a full life span.

V.27:

- “I will send my terror ahead of you and throw into confusion every nation you encounter. I will make all your enemies turn their backs and run.

V.28:

- I will send the hornet ahead of you to drive the Hivites, Canaanites and Hittites out of your way. [Commentary: Some theologians take the reference to “the hornet” literally. Others say it refers to the Egyptian army.]

V.29:

- But I will not drive them out in a single year, because the land would become desolate and the wild animals too numerous for you.

V.30:

- Little by little I will drive them out before you, until you have increased enough to take possession of the land.

V.31:

- “I will establish your borders from the Red Sea to the Sea of the Philistines, and from the desert to the River. I will hand over to you the people who live in the land and you will drive them out before you.

V.32:

- Do not make a covenant with them or with their gods.

V.33:

- Do not let them live in your land, or they will cause you to sin against me, because the worship of their gods will certainly be a snare to you.”

Observations/Process Questions:

- God promises to send His angel to lead His children “to bring them to a place prepared for them.” However, there are some conditions. What are they?
 - Pay attention and listen to what the angel says
 - Do not rebel against him
 - Do not bow down before the foreigners’ gods or worship them or follow their practices.
 - Demolish them and break their sacred stones to pieces.
 - Worship the Lord your God
 - Do not make any covenants with them or their gods
 - Do not let them live in your land, or they’ll cause you to sin against God
- Q: What are the rewards for listening to the angel and doing what he says to do?
 - God will be an enemy to their enemies and oppose those who oppose them
 - The angel will go ahead of them and wipe out six different groups of people
 - God’s blessing will be on your food and water.
 - He will take away sickness from among them
 - No woman will miscarry or be barren in their land.
 - He will give His children a full life span.
 - God will send His terror ahead and create confusion for every nation they encounter and make them turn their backs and run
 - God will send the hornet ahead to drive out three nations out of their way over time to allow Israelites to increase enough to take possession of the land.
 - He will establish their borders (Red Sea, Sea of Philistines, desert, river)

LOOK:

Congratulations, you have successfully completed your orientation meeting as an Israelite! So after three weeks of learning the Book of the Covenant, which were more ordinances to bring more understanding to the Ten Commandments.

So let's pretend you're an Israelite, and you couldn't remember all the details of each of these new ordinances, but you could broadly state the principles or values God was expressing through these new laws. What principles or values would you lean on to guide you?

1. Impartiality
2. Fairness
3. Take care of the needy, the underprivileged, the widow, etc
4. Restitution is expected
5. Integrity
6. Worship God alone

Close in Prayer

Commentaries for Today's Lesson:

Wiersbe, W. W. (1993). *Wiersbe's Expository Outlines on the Old Testament (Ex 23:1-33)*. Wheaton, IL: Victor Books.

V. Dispensing Justice (23:1–9)

The judicial system in Israel, like our system of courts today, depended on just laws, honest judges, and faithful witnesses. God's laws were just, but they could be deliberately misinterpreted by an unjust judge, or a lying witness could give false testimony. Judgment was not to be influenced by numbers (v. 2), money (vv. 3, 6, 8), personal feelings (vv. 4–5), or social status (v. 9).

When it comes to applying the law, God does not want the wicked to be justified (v. 7; 2 Chron. 6:23). But when it comes to saving lost sinners, God in His grace justifies the ungodly. (Rom. 4:5) He can do this because the penalty for our sins was borne on the cross by the Son of God.

VI. Celebrating Holy Times (23:10–19)

The worship of God and the working of the land (which belonged to God) were bound together. Israel's religious festivals were tied to the agricultural year in a series of "sevens." See Lev. 23. The seventh day was the Sabbath and the seventh year was the Sabbatical Year. The Feast of Unleavened Bread was celebrated for seven days after Passover. The seventh month opened with the Feast of Trumpets and included the Day of Atonement and the Feast of Tabernacles (Booths).

The weekly Sabbath not only reminded the Jews that they belonged to God, but it also showed God's care for the health of man and beast and the "health" of the land. The Sabbatical Year gave even more opportunity for rest and restoration. God is concerned about the way we use the natural resources He has graciously given us. If people kept this in mind today, there would be less exploitation of both human and natural resources.

Passover speaks of the death of Jesus Christ, the Lamb of God (Ex. 12; John 1:29); the Feast of Firstfruits is a type of His resurrection (1 Cor. 15:23); and the Feast of Tabernacles reminds us of His coming again and the future kingdom of joy and fullness (Zech. 14:16–21).

The puzzling statement about the kid and its mother's milk relates to a heathen practice that was a part of an idolatrous fertility rite (see 34:26 and Deut. 14:21). Moses connected this law with the harvest festivals because that is when heathen fertility rites were practiced.

VII. Conquering the Promised Land (23:20–33)

God promised His people victory because His angel would go before them and help them defeat their enemies, if the nation faithfully obeyed God's commandments. Their ownership of the land was purely by God's grace, but their enjoyment of the land depended on their faith and faithfulness.

Once in their land, the people were to beware not to imitate the idolatrous practices of the other nations. God promised His people health, prosperity, and safety if they obeyed Him, for these blessings were a part of His covenant. He has not guaranteed these same blessings to His new covenant people today, but He has promised to supply all our needs and enable us to live in victory over our spiritual enemies. Much of the "prosperity preaching" of our modern day is based on a misinterpretation of the Old Covenant that God made with the Jews.

Israel did conquer the Promised Land and destroy the cities and idols of the godless inhabitants. But gradually, God's people began to make peace with their neighbors and learn to worship their false gods and goddesses. This led to discipline in the land (the Book of Judges) and eventual captivity away from the land. Before we judge Israel too severely for this, however, we need to ask how much God's people today are compromising with the gods of this world, such as money, pleasure, and success.

Toussaint, S. D. (1985). Acts. (J. F. Walvoord & R. B. Zuck, Eds.) The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures. (Vol. 1, pp. 143–145). Wheaton, IL: Victor Books.

n. Statutes concerning legal justice (23:1–9)

23:1–9. These admonitions, which expand the ninth commandment (20:16), deal with the need for impartial justice in lawsuits. The Israelites were to bear a true witness in legal cases. Israelites were **not** to **pervert justice** by being influenced by **the crowd** or even by **favoritism to the poor**. The words **enemy's** (23:4) and **someone who hates you** (v. 5) probably mean “a legal adversary”; an Israelite was to be kind even to the animals of someone with whom he had a legal disagreement. Denying **justice to the poor** because of their social status (v. 6; cf. v. 3), giving **false** testimony in court that results in an **innocent** person's **death** (v. 7), accepting a **bribe** (payment for favoritism in court, v. 8; cf. Deut. 16:19—this was a common problem in the ancient Near East), and oppressing **an alien** (cf. Ex. 22:21; perhaps 23:9 refers to court cases) were all forbidden.

o. Statutes concerning the Sabbaths (23:10–13)

23:10–13. The Lord then instructed Israel concerning the sabbatical year (vv. 10–11) and the Sabbath Day (vv. 12–13), instructions that expanded the fourth commandment (20:8–11). The sabbatical year reminded Israel that God owns the land and that it was theirs merely as a trust (Lev. 25:23). Also the sabbatical year provided for **the poor**, who could glean from the **fields**.

By resting **on the seventh day** man and animals could **be refreshed** for another six days of work. This section (Ex. 23:13) ends with a general admonition to obey God's commands and a warning not to recognize the existence of any **other gods** by mentioning their **names**.

p. Statutes concerning annual festivals (23:14–19)

23:14–19. Here God gave instructions for three agricultural festivals to be held annually: (a) **the Feast of Unleavened Bread in the month of Abib** (March–April), about the time of the barley harvest; (b) **the Feast of Harvest** in the spring at the beginning of the wheat harvest (cf. 34:22) when **the firstfruits of the crops** were to be given to the Lord, and (c) **the Feast of Ingathering** in early autumn (September–October; cf. the chart “Calendar in Israel,” near 12:1).

The first of these great agricultural feasts was a memorial to the hasty Exodus from **Egypt** (cf. 12:15–20). The second feast, in which two loaves made of new grain were presented to the Lord (Lev. 23:15–21), was also called the Feast of Weeks (Ex. 34:22) because it was celebrated seven weeks (50 days) after the Feast of Unleavened Bread. In the New Testament (Acts 2:1; 20:16; 1 Cor. 16:8) it is called the day of Pentecost. The third festival, the Feast of Ingathering—

at **the end of the** agricultural or civil **year**—was also called the Feast of Tabernacles or Feast of Booths (Lev. 23:33–36; Deut. 16:13–15; 31:10).

These were constant reminders to Israel of God’s provisions for His people. So **three times a year** (Ex. 23:14, 17; 34:23) **all** adult males in Israel were supposed to worship at the tabernacle (or later, at the temple) with grain and animal offerings. When an offering was consumed on the altar it had to be without **yeast**. Only **the best of** the crops’ **firstfruits** were to be given to the Lord.

The prohibition against cooking **a young goat in its mother’s milk** (23:19; cf. 34:26; Deut. 14:21) may have been because of religious practices in which the Canaanites cooked goats in their mother’s milk in a fertility rite. God did not want His people to partake of anything related to idolatrous worship. Or the prohibition may have been against the inhumane treatment of young goats. In the Feast of Ingathering (Ex. 23:16b) the Israelites may have been tempted to follow the common bedouin practice of cooking the meat of young goats in goat’s milk, whereas the young goats should have been left with their mothers. In other words, perhaps the prohibition meant that the Israelites were not to take what was intended to promote life (goat milk) and use it to destroy life. This stipulation may be the basis for the present Jewish custom of not mixing milk products with meat.

q. Epilogue: A promise about the Conquest of the land (23:20–33)

The section on the ordinances (beginning at 20:22) has a comforting promise about God’s directing His people into the Promised Land wherein the laws just enumerated would be practiced. It contains promises of cursings for disobedience and blessings for obedience, similar to those in Leviticus and Deuteronomy.

23:20–26. First the Lord stressed the need for obedience. The **angel** (vv. 20, 23) may have been a special guardian angel for Israel (perhaps Michael, Dan. 12:1) or, more likely, the Lord Himself or the preincarnate Christ (cf. Gen. 24:7 with Gen. 24:27; and see comments on Gen. 16:9) because of His ability to forgive. God promised to guide His people in the days before them; specifically, of course, the guidance would come through Moses and Aaron. When the people arrived in Canaan God promised to **wipe ... out** her enemies (on the peoples named in Ex. 23:23 see comments on 3:8). And the Israelites were to destroy the Canaanites’ idols and **sacred stones** (cf. 34:13; Deut. 7:5; 12:3). Possibly these stones were male fertility symbols. Worshiping and obeying God would result in their having health, longevity, and bounty.

23:27–30. God also promised to give the Israelites the land gradually. Their enemies, terrorized by God, would be confused and would retreat. Like running to escape the sting of a **hornet**, they would flee in fear and panic (cf. 15:15; Num. 22:3; Josh. 2:9–11, 24; 5:1; 9:24). Some Bible students, however, take the reference to “the hornet” literally. Others say it refers to the Egyptian army.

The Conquest would take longer than a **year**; in fact Joshua’s Conquest, which did not wipe out all the enemies, took seven years (1406–1399 B.C.). If God had given them the land all at once rather than **little by little** (cf. Jud. 1) **the land would** have **become desolate** and overrun by **wild animals** before Israel could settle in and cultivate it.

23:31–33. Then the Lord prescribed the borders of the Promised Land. **The Red Sea** in this case is the part of the Red Sea now known as the Sea of Aqaba (probably to form the nation’s southeastern boundary). **The Sea of the Philistines** would be the western boundary (the Mediterranean Sea), **the desert** the southern boundary, and **the Euphrates River** the northern (or northeastern) boundary. This territory was occupied during the time of Solomon (1 Kings 4:21)

though much of it was not fully under Israel. Pockets of the enemy still lived in the land as vassals to Israel (cf. Deut. 11:24 and see comments on Deut. 1:7). Yet the presence of these enemies **in the land** was a constant menace to Israel, as God had predicted. Joshua 9:3–15 records a violation of God’s command **not to make a covenant** or treaty (cf. Ex. 34:12) **with** any of the foreign peoples in the land of Canaan. Failure to **drive ... out** the enemy (23:31) would result in their causing Israel to sin primarily through their idolatry. Israel’s later history certainly proved this to be true.

Cabal, T., Brand, C. O., Clendenen, E. R., Copan, P., Moreland, J. P., & Powell, D. (2007). The Apologetics Study Bible: Real Questions, Straight Answers, Stronger Faith (pp. 123 – 124). Nashville, TN: Holman Bible Publishers.

23:7 If the Israelites were not to kill the innocent, why were they ordered to kill Canaanite children (see Dt 7:1–2; 20:16–17)? This verse is part of a larger section that provides guidance to judges when trying cases in Israel: in courts of law the innocent were not to be punished. But the elimination of entire cultural groups as punishment for long-term institutionalized sin was not considered a legal matter. It was an issue of divine judgment following centuries of unacceptable conduct. God ordered the Israelites to eliminate cultures that had institutionalized despicable sin. Canaanite cultures were steeped in a religion that was polytheistic, idolatrous, and highly immoral. As part of their religious corruption, those cultures permitted human sacrifice and practiced cultic prostitution (worship of their “gods” involved intercourse with women attached to their temples). All of this cultural perversity was offensive to God and was to be brought to a complete end when the iniquity of the inhabitants of Canaan was complete (Gn 15:16).

23:10–11 The produce of the Israelites’ land was to be left for the poor and the animals, but it could also be eaten by the landowner’s family during the seventh year (Lv 25:6). The landholder was to be considerate of the needs of the poor. They, too, must be given access to the food needed to sustain them. To assure that there would be enough food for all in the seventh year, the landowner and his family was to stockpile surplus grain from the previous year (Lv 25:21–22).

23:20–23 Did the Angel of the Lord lead the Israelites through the desert, or was it God (Dt 8:2; Ps 136:16)? The biblical answer seems to be that God led His people through His angel. For further discussion of the close connection between God and the Angel of the Lord, see note on 3:2.