

Exodus Chapters 21-23a - John Karmelich

After my last lesson, I keep pondering what does one discuss after the "10 Commandments"? For those who don't know Chapter 20 was God literally speaking "The 10"! After that, wouldn't whatever comes next be seen as a letdown? How does one follow the "10"? With details and explanations of what God wants us to know. He's telling Moses in effect, now that I've got your attention, it's time for the details! To me this is like watching a press conference with the top guy stating the key facts. Then another one comes on the stage to give a long speech about details relevant to what was just said. In effect that's the message of these chapters. Personally after God said the "10", I'd be thinking, "What about this or that situation and how do we deal with that?" In other words, how do we deal with things not addressed in "The Big 10"? I realize all of God's laws are important or they would not be in the bible. Realize these commandments in these three chapters are given before the instructions of a tabernacle that God wants them to make to worship Him. The commands in these three chapters are important enough that they're grouped here, while people are thinking about Him.

An important concept to grasp is that God is obsessed with justice. I'd argue God is fully just and He is fully-loving at all times. That is why Christians are obsessed with the idea that only God Himself could pay for our sins. That's why His sin payment is fully justified: God can be fully-loving in accepting the full payment (Jesus as God's payment) for our sins. OK, that's old news for most of us. I'm getting into all of this as we're about to study a bunch of laws. Some are common sense. Others need comments on them to grasp the meaning. Some are important in context. For example those Israelites lived as slaves for the last 400 years. Therefore dealing with slavery comes up first (right after text on how God wants us to worship Him which is the last part of Chapter 20 and I explained two lessons back).

Bottom line, I'm going to cover a lot of ground in two pages. There's a lot more details to this which is why I wrote a longer lesson on this text many years ago (and you're welcome to read with links below). I just want to summarize the key points here. We're going to cover a lot of ground fast, "so put on your running shoes" and let's get moving through all of this. Hopefully it'll give you food for thought as how God wants us to live as a witness for Him. Obviously, a lot of these laws should be studied carefully if we come to situations that affect us. Many modern laws are based on these biblical principles. Notice as we read some of these laws, how God cares about our relationships with other people more than the fate of animals (e.g., a death sentence for bestiality)! Realize all these laws are given prior to about 15 chapters (coming up) dedicated to building a worship structure to God. Again I won't cover all of these laws in detail, but just give some key points that we should consider:

The first topic is slavery. First understand this is not about say, stealing people from their homes as to make them slaves. That's stealing and forbidden. This is about people in debt who can't pay what they owe. Therefore they pay with "time". There are a bunch of rules given with an emphasis on doing the right thing (think justice) and not abusing the situation. For example, slaves (where a debt's owed) has to be set free after six years. If a master hurts a slave (even knocks out a tooth!) the slave's no longer a slave. If a man sells his daughter as a bride to pay for a debt, the essential point is to treat her fairly. It is a running thought all through this section about doing what's fair and right, even if it's a slave.

We get comments relating to the "10 Commandments": For example, striking one's parents with intent to kill them as opposed to self-defense is a capital crime. Kidnapping is a capital crime. Even a lack of respect for the family can in some cases be a capital crime. They're even laws about hitting a pregnant woman. If it causes the baby in the womb to die, it's a crime if the baby dies. If the woman or the baby lives, it's a matter of an appropriate fine. The final laws in Chapter 21 are about doing what's fair if say

a person falls into a pit you made, an appropriate punishment is to be made. Finally if an animal kills someone, the animal is to be killed because human life is to be respected more than animal life.

Then we get laws about stealing in Chapter 22. Notice the fine is greater than what's stolen. If one does damage via fire, restitution is required. Then we get laws about guarding stuff for someone else. What is a key point is if we're taking care of something and it's wasted, the guarder has to pay damages. That means responsibility comes with a price. By the way the price of a slave was at 30 pieces of silver, the exact amount Judas was given for betraying Jesus. Yes that was not a coincidence!

Next are laws about social justice, for example if a man seduces a woman, he's required to marry her or else pay a fee to the family of that woman! To permit sorcery is a death sentence. Why? Because that gets people not to look to God for guidance for our lives. Next it says bestiality is a capital crime. The Israelites were going to a land where that was common. God wanted to show human life should not be mixed (same level) as the animal kingdom! Then comes the obvious one where it's a death sentence to worship any God but the true God. That doesn't mean killing foreigners. It means if we are going to be a follower of the true God we must "Put our money where our mouth is". Then we get more laws about doing what's right in lending. E.g., no high interest loans to poor people. It also includes not taking for the night one's only blanket if it's cold. The idea is fairness and compassion.

The final laws of Chapter 22 have to do with honoring God's rules for the first born. That means the 1st son's required paying a fine as a reminder the first of everything belongs to God. The first born animals were also killed as a reminder that we give God the first of what we sow! Chapter 23 continues on the social justice theme. There's a verse about not lying as a witness. It even includes a law about doing a good deed for a person we don't like! This section ends with the reminder that Israelites were slaves so they should treat other oppressed (suffering) people with mercy!

The last set of rules in Chapter 23 deal with laws for holidays and the weekly day of rest. The idea is to honor God through these specified holidays (that we'll get into more detail about later in the book) plus doing things to keep our focus on God by doing special rituals and sacrifices on these holidays. What I believe the summary point here is not only to do what's fair, just and right, but to take the time to honor God by being different enough from everyone else around us!

I admit the "details can be boring". It's one of those situations you don't want to think about unless it is affecting you (or someone you care about) at this moment. My view is these laws should be a part of a normal "through the bible" study as it reminds us that 1) The God we worship cares about our behavior with other people. 2) God we worship believes in justice and we should carry it out. 3) God expects us to be a witness for Him. That means not acting like non-believers. Grant it nonbelievers may do what's right, but nonbelievers won't make the effort to honor the God who created everything to begin with. A key reason the American founders believed in creating a nation "Under God" is an ultimate authority's necessary to get people to do what's right and not just the power of the government.

I did stop short of finishing Chapter 23, because the last part goes well with Chapter 24 and I'll explain that in the next lesson. What's important here is to realize the "details" are necessary to live in a society where people respect each other and to honor the God who created us. That is why we were created in the first place! To state what I hope is obvious, I skipped over a lot of details which is why I encourage you to read the full lesson I wrote on these chapters. Either way, I'm grateful for you reading this and I hope it helps you grow in your relationship with God and appreciate how the law benefits us as we use our lives as a witness for Him.

If interested, there are two other links on this chapter. They are for a more detailed lesson that I wrote about 20 years ago. Of course, you're welcome to read that if you'd like. Either way, I'm grateful that you did read this! If you're new here, realize you're always welcome to e-mail me. Thanks again, John