

Exodus 23

This chapter is the last portion of the giving of rules and regulations in Exodus, though the rules will be greatly expanded in the books of Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy. In addition to a few more rules, there is what some scholars refer to as an “epilogue” that informs the people about their future conquest of the land. Prior to the epilogue there are three sections of laws: those ensuring justice for all, sabbath keeping and festivals.

The first section has to do with justice for all. The rules in this section are all based, once again, on God’s love for all people. We can see this in the following ways: First, individuals are not to give false reports intended to bring harm to another person (perhaps out of anger or jealousy). This includes speaking truthfully in court and not favoring rich or poor (either of which would be showing more love to one person and less to another). While both rich and poor are to be treated equally, there is an emphasis on insuring justice for the powerless. Second, individuals are to help their enemies as well as their friends. The examples are caring for the animals of an enemy. Third, there is a final reminder to not oppress an alien because the Hebrews were aliens and oppressed.

The second section has to do with the sabbath and has two components. The first is that sabbath is for humans and the land. All fields are to lay fallow for a year, every seventh year. All persons, including aliens, and animals are then to eat whatever they can from the fallow ground. While this has often been understood as only a sabbath for the land, it is also a sabbath for the farmers, who can rest and remember that the land produces because of God’s grace and not because of “mother nature” or the mastery of the farmer over the land. The second component is that sabbath is for animals as well as human beings. Just as all human slaves are freed after six years of service, so all animals are to be freed as well (at least for a year).

The third section has to do with the three festivals that the Israelite people are to hold every year. These are festivals at planting (Passover), first fruits and harvest, or ingathering. What is unique about these festivals is that the males are to gather “before the Lord” on each occasion. These are communal festivals that are intended to remind the people of God’s providential care. In addition, it reminds the people that they are a community, a nation, bound together with YHWH by these rituals.

Following the establishment of the festivals are three extraneous commands, two of which no one knows their origin or purpose. These are not offering blood with anything leavened and not boiling a kid in its mother’s milk. The middle rule, to bring the first fruits to God is one final reminder of what was owed to the one who provides for the people.

Finally, the epilogue. This last section is a “good news”, “bad news” announcement. The good news is that as the people move toward their destination, and angel of God will go before them, fight for them and make the enemies of God’s people the angel’s enemies. There has been much discussion about the identity of the angel, but no one is sure as to who this angel is, or how the angel manifests itself. The bad news comes in several forms. First, the angel will only fight for the people if the people are faithful. Second, there are nations already in the land who must be defeated. Three, the driving out of the other nations will not occur all at once but will take time. With all of that having been said, the point of the conquest is clear; to give God’s people a place to become the people God desires them to be, a people guided by YHWH, treating all fairly without the pressure of having to confirm to, or be ensnared by, the ways of the people who are presently in the land.

Reflections: Once again we listen as God reminds the people that they are to be a people of justice, fairness, truthfulness, rest, and reverence. These are to be the virtues of the Hebrew people, and ultimately the followers of Jesus as well. As we look at our world what we often witness is the opposite of these virtues. We see individuals willing to sell their souls for power and privilege.

Questions:

1. Where have you struggled to care for your enemies?
2. What is your pattern of rest?
3. How do you square the conquest of the land with God’s love for all people?