

The Book of Exodus, Teacher's Guide

Lesson 16: More Laws and the Three Annual Feasts

Exodus 23:1-33

Teaching Aim (Teacher Orientation)

Exodus 23 completes the Book of the Covenant with a rich mixture of moral commands, sabbath rests, the three annual feasts, and a closing promise of God's guiding presence. The teacher should help the class distinguish what carries over from what does not. The three pilgrim feasts, like the Sabbath and the sacrificial system, were Old Covenant shadows that have found their substance in Christ; they are not bound on Christians (Colossians 2:16-17). We do not keep the Feast of Ingathering or make the three annual pilgrimages. Yet these shadows are not empty: Christ is our Passover (1 Corinthians 5:7), the feasts pointed to realities now fulfilled in Him, and the grateful, joyful worship they cultivated is taken up by the New Covenant people who gather to celebrate before the Lord on His day.

Woven through the chapter are timeless moral truths that reveal the unchanging heart of God, and these the teacher should press home. God's passion for impartial justice that will not follow a crowd into evil, will not pervert judgment for the great, and will not even flatter the poor in a dispute; His startling command to do good to an enemy, returning his wandering ox and lifting his fallen donkey, anticipating Jesus' call to love our enemies; His mercy that builds rest into the world for the worker, the stranger, and even the animals; and His concern for the poor and the sojourner all testify to who God is. The conquest and driving-out commands at the chapter's close belong to Israel's covenant history as God's just judgment on the deeply corrupt nations of Canaan; they are to be handled in that historical, covenantal frame and not as a model for how Christians treat their neighbors or enemies, which Jesus has settled by calling us to love.

Beyond the doctrine, this lesson aims to form a people who reflect the justice and mercy of their God. The class should leave examining where the crowd pulls them into compromise, whom they are refusing to do good to, where restless striving has crowded out mercy and rest, and whether their worship is marked by the joyful gratitude these feasts were meant to cultivate. And they should leave comforted by the promise that closes the chapter: the God who sent His angel before Israel goes before His people still, fulfilled in Christ who is with us always, guiding us to the place He has prepared.

Question 1

Student Question:

Read 23:1-3. God forbids spreading false reports, joining a crowd to do evil, and showing partiality in judgment, whether toward the great or the poor. What do these commands reveal

about God's own character as a God of truth and impartial justice (compare Deuteronomy 1:17; Acts 10:34–35)?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

The chapter opens with commands guarding truth and impartial justice (23:1–3). You shall not spread a false report; you shall not join hands with a wicked man to be a malicious witness; you shall not fall in with the many to do evil. God's people are to be truthful witnesses who will not let a lie travel through them and who will not be swept into wrong by the momentum of a crowd.

Notice the striking balance of impartiality. God forbids perverting justice against the poor (23:6) but also forbids being partial to a poor man in his lawsuit (23:3). Justice does not tilt for the powerful, and it does not tilt for the sympathetic either. Truth is truth regardless of who stands to gain or lose. This reflects God's own character: the Lord your God is not partial and takes no bribe (Deuteronomy 10:17).

Show how this reveals God and binds His people. God is a God of truth who shows no partiality (Acts 10:34–35), and judges in Israel were charged, you shall not be partial in judgment; you shall hear the small and the great alike (Deuteronomy 1:17). Though these are civil instructions for Israel, the principles, truthfulness and impartiality, flow straight into the New Covenant, where favoritism is condemned as sin (James 2:1–9).

Help the class feel the courage this requires. To refuse to follow a crowd into evil often means standing alone, resisting pressure, paying a social cost. God calls His people to a justice anchored in His character rather than in the shifting mood of the majority.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- God's people as truthful witnesses who refuse to spread false reports (Exodus 23:1).
- Refusing to follow a crowd or the majority into evil (Exodus 23:2).
- Impartial justice that favors neither the great nor the poor (Exodus 23:3, 6; Deuteronomy 1:17).
- God's own character as a God of truth who shows no partiality (Acts 10:34–35), binding His people still (James 2:1–9).

Discussion Prompts

- Why does God forbid partiality toward the poor as well as toward the great?
- What does it reveal about God that He demands such impartial justice?
- Where does following a crowd most tempt us to abandon what is true?

Question 2

Student Question:

It is far easier to go along with the crowd than to stand alone for what is right. Where have you let the momentum of a group, at work, online, or among friends, carry you into something you knew was wrong, and what would it take to stand firm next time?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This self-examining question presses the command not to follow a crowd into the realities of our lives. The pull of the group is one of the strongest forces on human behavior. We gossip because others are gossiping, stay silent at injustice because no one else is speaking, pile on a target online because the mob already has, or cut corners because everyone does.

Help students see that the crowd does not change the morality of an act. Wrong does not become right because many are doing it, and Scripture warns against being conformed to this world (Romans 12:2). The courage to stand alone for what is right is one of the clearest marks of a heart anchored in God rather than in human approval.

Move toward concrete resolve. Invite students to recall a specific time the momentum of a group carried them into something they knew was wrong, and to consider what would help them stand firm next time, a settled conviction, a friend who will stand with them, a willingness to bear the cost of being the odd one out. The aim is a people whose conscience is governed by God, not by the room.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The powerful pull of the crowd toward gossip, silence, piling on, and cutting corners.
- Wrong remaining wrong even when many are doing it (Romans 12:2).
- Courage to stand alone as a mark of a heart anchored in God, not human approval.
- Practical helps for standing firm: settled conviction, supportive friends, willingness to bear the cost.

Discussion Prompts

- When has the momentum of a group carried you into something you knew was wrong?
- Why is it so hard to stand alone, and what helps us do it?
- What conviction do you need to settle now so you can stand firm next time?

Question 3

Student Question:

Read 23:4–5. God commands Israel to return a straying ox and to help with the fallen donkey even when it belongs to an enemy. How does this anticipate Jesus' command to love our enemies and do good to those who hate us (Matthew 5:43–48; Romans 12:20–21)?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

These two short verses are among the most remarkable in the law (23:4–5). If you meet your enemy's ox or his donkey going astray, you shall bring it back to him. If you see the donkey of one who hates you lying down under its burden, you shall rescue it with him. God commands active good toward the very person who hates you, refusing to let enmity excuse neglect or harm.

Notice how specific and costly this is. It is not a vague sentiment but a concrete act: chasing down a wandering animal, stooping in the dirt to help lift a load, working side by side with someone you cannot stand. God will not allow His people to use a quarrel as a license to leave an enemy in trouble. The wandering ox and the fallen donkey become the test of whether His people share His heart.

Show how this anticipates Jesus. Centuries later Jesus would say, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father (Matthew 5:43–48), and Paul would urge, if your enemy is hungry, feed him; overcome evil with good (Romans 12:20–21). The seed of enemy-love planted in Exodus 23 flowers fully in the gospel, where God Himself loved us while we were still His enemies (Romans 5:10).

Help the class see the continuity of God's heart. The God of Sinai already refused to let His people hate; the God revealed in Jesus calls us to the same and empowers it. This is one place where an Old Covenant command and the heart of Christ run directly together.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- God commanding active, concrete good toward an enemy, not mere restraint (Exodus 23:4–5).
- Enmity never excusing neglect or harm of another's need.
- Jesus' command to love enemies and do good to those who hate us (Matthew 5:43–48).
- God Himself loving us while we were His enemies (Romans 5:10; Romans 12:20–21).

Discussion Prompts

- Why is it so striking that God commands help for an enemy's animal?
- How does this command anticipate the teaching and example of Jesus?
- What does active enemy-love require beyond simply not retaliating?

Question 4

Student Question:

Jesus calls us not merely to avoid harming our enemies but to actively seek their good. Who is the enemy or difficult person God is bringing to mind, and what concrete good could you do for them rather than waiting for them to change?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This self-examining question takes the enemy-love of these verses straight to the heart. Jesus raises the bar from not harming our enemies to actively seeking their good, blessing those who curse us and praying for those who mistreat us (Luke 6:27–28). This is among the hardest commands in Scripture, and it cannot be obeyed by gritted teeth alone but flows from a heart transformed by God’s own enemy-love toward us.

Help students get specific. The command stays abstract until we name the actual person, the relative we avoid, the coworker who undermined us, the neighbor who wronged us, the one whose name still tightens our chest. Enemy-love begins when a real face replaces the general idea.

Move toward concrete action. Returning the wandering ox was a deed, not a feeling, and so is the good Jesus calls us to. Invite students to choose one tangible good they could do for a difficult person this week, a prayer, a kindness, a word of blessing, a practical help, trusting God to soften both hearts. We do not wait for the enemy to change before we obey; we obey, and entrust the rest to God.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Jesus raising the standard to actively seeking an enemy’s good (Luke 6:27–28).
- Enemy-love flowing from God’s enemy-love toward us, not from gritted effort.
- Naming the real person rather than keeping the command abstract.
- Choosing a concrete good to do without waiting for the enemy to change.

Discussion Prompts

- Who is the enemy or difficult person God is bringing to your mind right now?
- What concrete good could you do for them this week?
- How does remembering God’s love for us while we were His enemies help you obey?

Question 5

Student Question:

Read 23:6–9. God repeats His concern for justice for the poor, warns against taking bribes that blind the eyes, and commands kindness to the sojourner, for you know the heart of a sojourner. What does this reveal about how God’s people are to treat the vulnerable and the outsider (compare James 2:1–9)?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

These verses return to justice for the vulnerable (23:6–9). God forbids perverting the justice due the poor, commands keeping far from a false charge, and warns that a bribe blinds the clear-sighted and subverts the cause of the righteous (23:6–8). Justice is to be clean, uncorrupted by money or favor, especially toward those least able to defend themselves.

Linger on the command about the sojourner: you shall not oppress a sojourner; you know the heart of a sojourner, for you were sojourners in the land of Egypt (23:9). God grounds compassion in memory. Israel is to treat the outsider well precisely because they remember what it felt like to be outsiders, mistreated and powerless. Their own history of need is meant to make them tender.

Show how this reveals God and carries into the church. God repeatedly identifies with the vulnerable and the outsider, and the New Testament forbids the favoritism that honors the rich and shames the poor, calling it a sin that breaks the royal law of love your neighbor as yourself (James 2:1-9). The principle endures: God's people do not let wealth, status, or partiality corrupt how they treat others.

These remain civil instructions for Israel, not church statutes, but the heart behind them, impartial justice and compassion rooted in remembered grace, belongs to every generation of God's people.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Justice for the poor kept clean from false charges and bribes (Exodus 23:6-8).
- Compassion for the sojourner grounded in Israel's own remembered experience as outsiders (Exodus 23:9).
- God identifying with the vulnerable and the outsider across Scripture.
- The New Testament condemning favoritism as a breach of the royal law of love (James 2:1-9).

Discussion Prompts

- How does a bribe blind even a clear-sighted judge?
- Why does God ground kindness to the stranger in Israel's own memory of Egypt?
- How does remembering our own past need shape the way we treat others?

Question 6

Student Question:

We are quick to judge others while excusing ourselves, and we forget what it felt like to be the outsider. Where is God calling you to remember your own past need or weakness so that you treat the struggling and the stranger with more compassion?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This self-examining question takes God's appeal to memory, you know the heart of a sojourner, and turns it on us. We are quick to judge others and slow to remember our own past struggles, weaknesses, and times of need. That forgetfulness makes us harsh toward the very people we should understand best.

Help students recover their own story. Most of us were once the newcomer who did not know anyone, the one who failed and needed grace, the struggler who depended on another's kindness. When we forget those seasons, we grow proud and impatient toward those now in them. Remembering keeps our hearts soft.

Move toward compassion in action. Invite students to recall a time they were the outsider, the weak one, the one in need, and to let that memory shape how they treat a particular struggling person or stranger this week. The grace we have received is meant to flow through us; we love because we were first loved, and we show mercy because we have received it (Matthew 18:32–33).

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Being quick to judge others while forgetting our own past struggles and need.
- Forgetfulness breeding harshness toward those we should understand best.
- Recovering our own story as the outsider, the weak, the one once in need.
- Showing mercy because we ourselves have received it (Matthew 18:32–33).

Discussion Prompts

- When were you the outsider, the weak one, or the one in need of grace?
- How might remembering that change the way you treat a struggling person this week?
- Where has forgetting your own past made you harsher than you should be?

Question 7

Student Question:

Read 23:10–13. God builds rest into Israel's life: a sabbath year for the land and a sabbath day each week, so that the poor, the servant, the sojourner, and even the animals may rest and be refreshed. What does this rhythm of rest reveal about God's care for His whole creation, and how is its deeper rest fulfilled in Christ (Hebrews 4:9–10; Colossians 2:16–17)?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

These verses weave rest into the fabric of Israel's life (23:10–13). Every seventh year the land was to lie fallow, and what grew of itself was left for the poor and the wild animals to eat (23:10–11). Every seventh day was a sabbath, so that your ox and your donkey may have rest, and the son of your servant woman, and the alien, may be refreshed (23:12). Rest here is an act of mercy reaching even to the animals and the most overworked members of society.

Show what this reveals about God. He is not a taskmaster who values His creatures only for their output. He builds refreshment into the world, cares for the worker and the stranger and the beast, and even provides for the poor through the resting land. Rest, in God's design, is mercy and trust woven into time, a regular release from relentless striving.

Handle the fulfillment carefully, as with the Sabbath generally. These sabbath rhythms were given to Israel under the Old Covenant. The weekly Sabbath was a sign of that covenant and is named a shadow whose substance belongs to Christ (Colossians 2:16–17); it is not bound on Christians, who gather on the Lord's Day, the first day of the week (Acts 20:7), not under a Christian Sabbath. The deeper rest these rhythms anticipated is fulfilled in Christ, the Sabbath rest that remains for the people of God, entered by ceasing from our own works to trust His finished work (Hebrews 4:9–10).

So we do not keep the sabbath year or bind the seventh-day Sabbath, yet we honor the truth these rhythms taught, that God made His creatures to rest, that mercy includes refreshment, and that our deepest rest is found in Christ rather than in a day on the calendar.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Sabbath year and sabbath day as mercy reaching to the poor, the servant, the stranger, and the animals (Exodus 23:10–12).
- God building rest and refreshment into the fabric of His creation, not valuing creatures only for output.
- The Sabbath as a sign of the Old Covenant, a shadow whose substance is Christ, not bound on Christians (Colossians 2:16–17).
- Christians gathering on the Lord's Day, not a Christian Sabbath (Acts 20:7).
- The deeper rest fulfilled in Christ, entered by trusting His finished work (Hebrews 4:9–10).

Discussion Prompts

- What does it reveal about God that His rest laws even include the animals and the poor?
- How is the rest these rhythms pointed toward fulfilled in Christ?
- Why do Christians gather on the Lord's Day rather than keeping a Christian Sabbath?

Question 8

Student Question:

God designed rest as an act of mercy and trust, not a sign of weakness. Where has restless striving crowded mercy and refreshment out of your life and out of your treatment of those who depend on you, and what would God-honoring rest look like?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This self-examining question takes the mercy of God's rest and turns it on our restless lives. We often treat rest as weakness or wasted time, wearing our exhaustion like a badge and driving ourselves, and sometimes those who depend on us, without pause. God's design rebukes that. He wove rest into time as an act of mercy and trust.

Help students see what restlessness costs. When we cannot stop, mercy and refreshment get crowded out, of our own lives and of the lives of those under us, the family that never sees us at peace, the employee never allowed to breathe, the body and soul run ragged. Often the inability to rest is a quiet refusal to trust that God, not our striving, holds our lives together.

Move toward God-honoring rest. This is not legalistic Sabbath-keeping but the wisdom of a creature made to depend on the Creator. Invite students to consider where restless striving has squeezed out mercy and where they might build in genuine rest and refreshment, for themselves and for those they influence, learning to lean their full weight on Christ, who gives rest to the weary (Matthew 11:28–29).

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Treating rest as weakness rather than as God-designed mercy and trust.
- Restless striving crowding out refreshment for ourselves and those who depend on us.
- Inability to rest as a quiet refusal to trust God with our lives.
- Leaning our full weight on Christ, who gives rest to the weary (Matthew 11:28–29).

Discussion Prompts

- Where has restless striving crowded mercy and rest out of your life?
- How does your inability to stop affect the people who depend on you?
- What would God-honoring rest look like for you this week?

Question 9

Student Question:

Read 23:14–19. God commands the three annual pilgrim feasts, Unleavened Bread, Harvest (Weeks), and Ingathering, when all Israel rejoiced and gave thanks before the Lord. These feasts were Old Covenant shadows now fulfilled in Christ and are not bound on Christians (Colossians 2:16–17). How then should believers understand these feasts, seeing them fulfilled in Christ our Passover and in the joyful, grateful worship of the New Covenant people (1 Corinthians 5:7–8), without binding the feast days on the church?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question handles the three annual feasts and carries the most doctrinal weight. Three times a year all Israel's men were to appear before the Lord (23:14–17): the Feast of Unleavened Bread (tied to Passover and the exodus), the Feast of Harvest or Weeks (the firstfruits of the wheat harvest, later called Pentecost), and the Feast of Ingathering at the year's end (the final harvest, later called Booths). These were joyful pilgrim festivals of gratitude, marking God's deliverance and provision and binding the nation together in worship before Him.

Be clear and careful about the doctrine. These feasts belonged to Israel under the Old Covenant. Like the Sabbath and the sacrificial system, they were shadows of things to come, and the substance belongs to Christ (Colossians 2:16–17). They are not bound on Christians. We do not keep Unleavened Bread, Weeks, or Ingathering, nor make the three annual pilgrimages. To impose these feast days on the church would be to return to the shadow after the substance has come, which Paul warns against (Galatians 4:9–11; Colossians 2:16–17).

Yet the feasts are not empty for us; they pointed forward and are fulfilled in Christ. Paul writes, Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed; let us therefore celebrate the feast, not with the old leaven, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth (1 Corinthians 5:7–8). The feast of firstfruits finds its echo in Christ the firstfruits of the resurrection (1 Corinthians 15:20) and in the harvest of the church poured out at Pentecost (Acts 2). The ingathering anticipates the final great harvest of God's people. The shadows have given way to glorious realities in Christ.

Then draw the abiding application. While we do not keep the feast days, the heart of these feasts, joyful, grateful, communal worship of the God who delivers and provides, is taken up by the New Covenant people. We gather on the Lord's Day to remember our deliverance in Christ and to give thanks, celebrating not a calendar of shadows but the substance Himself. Help the class hold both truths firmly: the feasts are not bound on us, and the realities they pictured are gloriously ours in Jesus.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The three annual pilgrim feasts as joyful gratitude for God's deliverance and provision (Exodus 23:14–17).
- The feasts as Old Covenant shadows whose substance belongs to Christ, not bound on Christians (Colossians 2:16–17; Galatians 4:9–11).
- Christ our Passover fulfilling Unleavened Bread; firstfruits and Pentecost fulfilled in Christ and the church (1 Corinthians 5:7–8; 15:20; Acts 2).
- The grateful, communal worship the feasts cultivated taken up by the New Covenant people on the Lord's Day.
- Holding both truths: the feast days are not bound on us, and their realities are ours in Christ.

Discussion Prompts

- What were the three feasts celebrating, and what did they teach Israel?
- Why are these feasts not bound on Christians today?
- How are the feasts fulfilled in Christ, and how does their spirit live on in our worship?

Question 10

Student Question:

Read 23:20–33. God promises to send His angel ahead of Israel to guard them and bring them to the place He has prepared. Looking back over this whole chapter, name one specific way the God

revealed here, who goes before His people and is fulfilled in Christ, is calling you to walk in His justice, mercy, and grateful worship this week.

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This capstone gathers the chapter and rests on its closing promise (23:20–33). God says, behold, I send an angel before you to guard you on the way and to bring you to the place that I have prepared (23:20). The chapter of commands ends not with a burden but with a promise of presence: the God who calls Israel to justice and mercy will Himself go before them and guide them home.

Handle the conquest and driving-out commands (23:23–33) with care and in their frame. God promises to drive out the deeply corrupt nations of Canaan before Israel, a specific act of His judgment in covenant history on peoples whose iniquity had become full (Genesis 15:16; Leviticus 18:24–25). This belongs to Israel's particular calling at a particular moment, not to a pattern for how Christians treat their neighbors or enemies. Jesus has settled that for His people: we are to love our enemies and overcome evil with good. So we read these verses as God's righteous judgment in that history, not as a model for our conduct.

Then lift the class to the abiding promise and to Christ. The God who sent His angel before Israel goes before His people still. He has prepared a place for us, and in Jesus, Immanuel, God with us, He is present always, to the end of the age (Matthew 28:20), leading us home to the place He has prepared (John 14:2–3). Invite students to name one specific way the God revealed in this chapter is calling them to walk in His justice, His mercy toward enemies and the vulnerable, His rhythm of rest, and His grateful worship this week, trusting the One who goes before them and is fulfilled in Christ to bring them safely home.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- God's promise to go before His people and bring them to the place He has prepared (Exodus 23:20).
- The conquest and driving-out commands as God's just judgment in Israel's covenant history, not a model for Christians (Genesis 15:16; Leviticus 18:24–25).
- Jesus settling the matter of enemies for His people by calling us to love.
- God's guiding presence fulfilled in Christ, Immanuel, with us always and preparing a place for us (Matthew 28:20; John 14:2–3).

Discussion Prompts

- How does the promise of God's guiding presence frame all the commands that came before it?
- How should we understand the conquest commands within Israel's covenant history rather than as a model for us?

- What is one specific way you will walk in God's justice, mercy, or grateful worship this week?