

The Book of Exodus

Lesson 16: More Laws and the Three Annual Feasts -- Exodus 23:1-33

Imagine you are standing in a crowd, and the crowd has made up its mind. Someone has been accused, the mood has turned, voices are rising, and everyone around you is leaning the same direction. It would be so easy to lean with them. To raise your voice with the rest. To let the momentum carry you. And then, into that exact moment, God speaks a quiet, bracing word: you shall not fall in with the many to do evil. Do not follow a crowd into wrong. Stand, even alone, for what is true. That is where this chapter begins, and it tells us at once that the God of Israel cares fiercely about justice that will not bend to pressure.

Exodus 23 keeps pressing on that nerve. Do not pervert justice for the great, but do not be partial to the poor either, simply because he is poor. Justice does not play favorites in any direction. And then comes one of the most surprising commands in the whole Old Testament: if you come across your enemy's ox or donkey wandering off, you must bring it back to him. Your enemy's animal. The man you cannot stand. God says, return it, help him lift the load off his fallen donkey. Centuries before Jesus said love your enemies, God was already teaching His people to do good to the ones they liked least.

From there the chapter opens into rest and feasting and promise. There is rest for the land every seventh year, and rest on the seventh day, so that the servant and the stranger and even the ox may catch their breath, rest born not of laziness but of mercy. There are three great annual feasts when all Israel would go up to celebrate before the Lord, Unleavened Bread, Harvest, and Ingathering, joyful pilgrim festivals woven into the rhythm of the year. And there is a stunning promise: God will send His angel before them to guard them on the way and bring them to the place He has prepared.

Now these feasts and many of these ordinances belonged to Israel under the Old Covenant, shadows that have found their substance in Christ, and we will not be keeping the Feast of Ingathering on our calendars. But do not rush past these verses. They are full of the unchanging heart of God: His passion for impartial justice, His refusal to let us hate our enemies, His mercy that builds rest into the world, His desire to be celebrated by a grateful people, and His tender promise to go before us and guide us home. Read this way, this ancient chapter still preaches, and it still points us to Jesus, who is the substance every shadow was reaching toward.

Group Discussion: God commanded Israel not to follow a crowd into wrong and not to show partiality to either the great or the poor in judgment. Why is impartial justice so central to the character of God, and where does the pressure of the crowd most tempt the church to compromise it today?

Personal Reflection: God told Israel to return even an enemy's wandering ox and to help lift the load off the donkey of someone who hated them. Who is the person you find hardest to do good to, and what would it look like this week to actively seek their good?

Read Exodus 23:1–33

Study Questions

1. 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)?
2. 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?
3. 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)?
4. 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?
5. 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)?

6. 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?
7. 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)?
8. 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?
9. 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?

10. 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.

Digging Deeper

Reflect on these passages: Matthew 5:43–48, where Jesus commands us to love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us; 1 Corinthians 5:7–8, where Christ is called our Passover, kept not with old leaven but in sincerity and truth; Colossians 2:16–17, where festivals and Sabbaths are named shadows whose substance belongs to Christ; James 2:1–9, which forbids partiality and shows favoritism breaking the royal law of love; Hebrews 4:9–10, which speaks of the Sabbath rest that remains for the people of God, entered by resting in Christ.

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