



Starlight Adult SS Lesson

Exodus 21-23 Moses Applies The Law

Having given Israel the Law of God in the Ten Commandments, Moses then explained & applied that Law to various aspects of human life. Wherever there is law, there must be interpretation & application; otherwise the law is impractical & not at all helpful. In the beginning, it was the priests who taught & applied the Law in Israel; but in later years, it was the scribes & rabbis who became the professional teachers of the Law. Unfortunately, their interpretations became as authoritative as the original Law, & it was this error that Jesus exposed through His teachings, especially the Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5-7; Mark 7:1-23).

I. Caring for Servants (21:1-11)

The Jews were allowed to buy & sell servants, but they were forbidden to treat them as slaves. Sometimes people had to sell themselves into service because of their poverty (Lev. 25:39; Deut. 15:12), but their service was limited to only six years. Then they had to be freed. If a servant wanted to remain with the master, the servant was marked in the ear & would remain in the household for life. (Deut. 15:17, Ps. 40:6) The Law gave special protection to female servants to make sure their masters did not abuse them & deprive them of their rights.

II. Compensating Personal Injuries (21:12-36)

These regulations were given to assure fairness in compensating people for injuries. "Eye for eye, tooth for tooth" (v. 24) is not a "law of the jungle" but an expression of fair payment for injuries received, so that the judges would not demand more or less than what was right. It is the basis for law today, although it is not always justly applied. Our Lord's words in Matt. 5:38-42 have to do with private revenge rather than public disobedience to the Law. There were several capital crimes in Israel, among them: murder (vv12-15), kidnapping (v16), cursing one's parents (v17), causing the death of a pregnant woman and/or her fetus (vv22-23), trafficking in demonism (22:18), & practicing bestiality (22:19). The basis for capital punishment is God's covenant with Noah (Gen. 9:1-6) & the fact that man is created in the image of God. It is God who gives life & only He has the right to take it away or authorize it to be taken (Rom 13).

God makes a distinction between deliberate murder & accidental death or manslaughter (vv. 12-13). The cities of refuge were provided for the protection of the person who accidentally killed someone (Num 35:6ff). With no police force, a slain person's family would feel obligated to avenge the death of their loved one. So, it was necessary to protect the innocent until the case could be investigated by the elders. God held the owner of an animal responsible for what it did to others (vv. 28-36), if that owner knew already that the animal was dangerous. The law made sure that nobody could take advantage of such situations & profit from them.

Verses 22-23 are basic to the pro-life position on abortion, for they indicate that the aborting of a fetus was equivalent to the murdering of the child. The guilty party was punished as a murderer ("life for life") if the mother or the unborn child, or both, died. (Ps. 139:13-16)

III. Protecting Personal Property (22:1-15)

Here Moses dealt with several kinds of theft, & he stated once again that the thief must make compensation to those who are wronged. But God holds sacred even the life of a thief who is breaking into a house! If he breaks in at night & is slain, the slayer is not charged. But if his crime is in the daytime, when the owner could call for help or even recognize the intruder & accuse him later, then the slayer is guilty of homicide.

Moses also deals with property damage caused by animals who eat in a field other than their master's (v. 5) or by uncontrolled fire (v. 6), & with loss of property entrusted to others (vv. 7-15). From these specific instances, the judges could derive principles that would help them decide cases that Moses did not explain in detail.

IV. Respecting Humanity (22:16-31)

This series of miscellaneous laws reveals God's concern for humanity & His desire that people not be exploited. This includes virgins (vv. 16-17; see Deut. 22:23-24), foreigners in the land (v. 21), widows (vv. 22-24), & the poor (vv. 25-27). God promises to hear the cries of those who are wronged & defend the poor & oppressed.

Witches & wizards were not permitted to live because they were in league with the demonic powers that operated in the godless religions of the nations around Israel. (Lev19:31, 20:27 & Deut18:9-12) Modern occult practices are an invitation for Satan to go to work & destroy lives. God also condemned sexual intercourse with animals (Lev20:15-16; Deut 27: 21). Not only were these practices a part of the heathen worship of idols, but they debased human sexuality which is a precious gift from God.

People were to respect rulers & refrain from cursing them, even as they would refrain from cursing God. According to Romans 13, the powers that be are ordained of God. If we curse a leader, we are in danger of cursing the God who established the authority of human government.

Verses 29-31 get to the heart of obeying the law: put God first in your life & gladly obey what He says. This is the OT version of Matt. 6:33.

V. Dispensing Justice (23:1-9)

The judicial system in Israel, like our system of courts today, depended on just laws, honest judges, & faithful witnesses. God's laws were just, but they could be misinterpreted by an unjust judge, or a lying witness could give false testimony. Judgment was not to be influenced by numbers (v2), money (v3, 6, 8), personal feelings (v4-5), or status (v9).

When it comes to applying the law, God does not want the wicked to be justified (v7; 2 Chron6:23). 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 & 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." (Lev23). The seventh day was the Sabbath & 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 & included the Day of Atonement & the Feast of Tabernacles (Booths).

The weekly Sabbath reminded the Jews that they belonged to God, & it also showed God's care for the health of man & beast & the "health" of the land. The Sabbatical Year gave even more opportunity for rest & 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 & natural resources.

Passover speaks of the death of Jesus Christ, the Lamb of God (Ex. 2; John 1:29); the Feast of First Fruits is a type of His resurrection (1 Cor. 15:23); & the Feast of Tabernacles reminds us of His coming again & the future kingdom of joy & fullness (Zech. 14:16-21).

The puzzling statement about the kid & its mother's milk relates to a heathen practice that was a part of an idolatrous fertility rite (34:26 & Deut14:21).

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 & 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 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, & 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 & 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 & destroy the cities & idols of the godless inhabitants. But gradually, God's people began to make peace with their neighbors & learn to worship their false gods. This led to discipline in the land (the Book of Judges) & 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, & success.*****