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**Session 9**

***God of Freedom, Week 5b***

**Exodus 23:10 – 24:18**

**13-14 November 2023**

**Personal Injury Laws –** God is establishing rules for fair practices among His people. Notice the repeated use of phrases such as “fathers and *mothers*” and “whether male or *female*.” There is a deliberate mention of women, showing that God is equally concerned for both men and women. And also note the special care and concern for the *unborn*: God is stressing that the unborn baby is fully human, that life begins in the womb, and so if a pregnant woman is struck in such a way that her baby is harmed, God sees that there is compensation to the child’s family and punishment for the offender.

**“An Eye for an Eye” –** These laws are given to be used by judges so that crimes will not be over-punished. The punishment meted out is to be commensurate with the offense. In the heat of the moment, people don’t want *justice*, they want *revenge*. They want to hurt you more than you hurt them. So God is giving guidelines to the judges that will limit abuses.

**Abuse of Slaves –** Note that God’s provision for a slave—again, either male or female—who has been physically harmed by his/her master is that that slave is to go free! Absolutely no abuse is acceptable, whether it is knocking out an eye or a tooth or some other action that leaves permanent damage or loss to the slave. If there is a mark on that slave, he/she goes free.

**Negligence –** God also lets it be known that negligence is not acceptable. Accidents may happen, but if someone knows that his ox habitually gores other animals or people, then if the ox does it again because he has failed to keep it safely confined, then he has to pay the penalty for his negligence.

**Property Laws –** At this time and in this culture, the most common form of property was livestock of various kinds, so there is an entire section of the Book of the Covenant dealing with animals. Notice that in this category, you don’t find the equivalent of “an eye for an eye”. Rather, if a man steals or kills someone else’s ox, he has to pay the owner FIVE oxen in recompense. If he has has stolen or killed a sheep, he has to repay FOUR sheep. **The basic principle is that in every case you have to pay back more than you took.** This is meant to be a deterrent to thievery.

**Killing a Thief –** Notice that there is no bloodguilt for killing a thief in self-defense in the middle of the night when the thief is trying to break into your house. You will not receive the death penalty for that. But if the sun is up and everything is in full view, then the penalty reflects that circumstance. You might not have had to strike him dead to protect yourself.

**Laws Governing Property on Loan –** There is an entire section devoted to various scenarios of dealing with borrowed property and how the borrower is to repay the lender, if necessary. Remember that these Israelites have had very little property of their own in the past, and both they and the judges need to know

what the laws are. Why? It isn’t enough just to have laws, God also wants His people to experience *order* in their lives. He is once again bringing order out of chaos. This is how a good Creator God orders His people.

**Social Justice –** In a culture where a girl was not marriageable if she was taken advantage of sexually—even if she was an innocent victim—God gave laws that protected her and provided for her. And note also that a woman was not to be spared just because she was a woman if she practiced sorcery. So God’s justice was equally applied to men and women.

**Laws Protecting the Marginalized –** Toward the end of the Book of the Covenant is a chiasmus that shows God’s concern for the sojourner, the poor, and the widows among the Israelites—i.e. anyone who was vulnerable and often subject to abuse in the cultures of the day. The central point of that chiasmus is found in 22:31, “You shall be consecrated to Me.” In other words, “Be holy, for I am holy.” Christ repeated this theme when He told His followers that they were to be perfect as their Heavenly Father is perfect. And Peter picked up on it again in 1 Peter 1:16. The point that God is making is that if we walk in holiness, we will treat the last and the least with dignity. The Israelites had just come out of a very oppressive culture where the weak and vulnerable were exploited. God is telling His people that they know what it is like to be the oppressed outsider, and He says in effect, “Don’t rebuild what you just left!”

**Laws About the Sabbath and Festivals –** The Lord expands the teaching about how to observe the Sabbath in various contexts and then gives instructions about three feasts that are to be celebrated annually, at three points in the agricultural cycle. The Passover Feast coincided with the early barley harvest. A few months later was the Feast of the Harvest, when they brought in some of the firstfruits of their crops, and at the end of the agricultural year was the Feast of Ingathering.

**Don’t Boil a Young Goat in Its Mother’s Milk –** This law, which seems very strange to us, has given rise to some of the present day rules for kosher cooking and eating. But the Israelites of Moses’ day would have recognized this custom as a pagan rite. It was believed that cooking a young animal in its mother’s milk would enhance its owner’s fertility. God does not want His people to pattern their lives after either the Egyptians or the Canaanites.

**Epilogue –** Notice that whereas God introduced the Ten Commandments by saying, “I am the Lord, who brought you out of Egypt,” He ends the Book of the Covenant by stating, “I am the Lord, who is bringing you into Canaan.” He lets the Israelites know that His presence among them will lead and guide them safely to their new home. And He tells them not to worship the gods of the Canaanites—which brings them right back to the First Commandment. Once again God is stressing that they are to act neither like the people where they came from nor like the people in the place to which they are going. They are to worship God, and God alone.

**Maintaining the Proper Distance from God –** There were three different levels of distance that the people were to maintain from God: the majority of the Israelites were to remain at the foot of the mountain,

while the elders and priests were allowed to accompany Moses partway up the mountain. Moses himself was allowed to go all the way to the top to meet with God. We will later see these same three levels of distance in the Tabernacle when it is built. The Tabernacle would have an outer court; then there was a middle space called the Holy Place; and then there was the Holy of Holies in the innermost part of the Tabernacle.

**Sprinkling the People with Blood –** When Moses came back down the mountain to share with the people the laws that God had given, he built and altar and took some of the blood from the sacrifice and threw it on the people. There is only one other time when blood was put on people, and that was at the consecration of the priests (Aaron and his sons). What Moses die is symbolic of what God had declared at the very beginning: “You will be to Me a royal priesthood and a holy nation.” They were to be a light in the darkness of the cultures around them.

**Take Aways for Us from the Book of the Covenant –** There are several things we can take away from the study of this particular section of scripture:

* When we love God properly, it leads to right worship.
* When we love our neighbor properly, it leads to right value.
* We know that the Israelites were unable to live up to their fervent promises to obey God completely—but Jesus Christ did! He too spreads a table where we can eat and drink in His presence and not be destroyed because He has made the final sacrifice.
* Because of this, we listen to His Law and say, “Let us live lives of lawfulness as His followers, that we might be a light in the darkness during our time in the wilderness.”

**A Parallel to 1 Peter**

We see echoes of today’s lesson in 1 Peter 1:14-16. (In fact, Jen quoted verse 16 in her lecture.)***“As obedient children, do not be conformed to the passions of your former ignorance, but as he who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct, since it is written, ‘You shall be holy, for I am holy’.”***So just as God told the Israelites to leave their former way of life behind and to consecrate themselves wholly to Him, so Peter reminded the believers of his day to no longer live as they used to live but to be completely holy in their dealings with those around them.