



THE EXODUS PART 4: GOVERNING THE PEOPLE AND THE GIVING OF THE LAW

INTO THE WORD

LESSON 13

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Introduction:

Israel was clearly unprepared for life in the harsh desert, having spent many years under Egypt's bondage. During their first few days in the wilderness they experienced the great provision of their God, despite their frequent demonstrations of unbelief. Also, Moses' spiritual leadership was developing as he continued to petition the Lord for his people. However, it was evident that Moses was becoming weary as he carried the huge responsibility of training and leading God's people. God was teaching both the children of Israel and their leader, Moses, to fully rely on Him to provide for their needs. As God demonstrated his mercy and love toward the people of Israel in the form of manna and quail, he also demonstrated His provision for Moses in the person and council of Moses' father in law, Jethro.

When Jethro journeyed to Israel's camp, Moses was able to tell him of the mighty works that God had done for Israel. Jethro also witnessed the huge spiritual, physical and emotional burden that Moses carried, as he watched the multitudes of people come before Moses to plead their causes (Exodus 18: 13-18). Jethro offered Moses wise council and directed him to assign leaders, men of truth and integrity, to serve under him to hear the daily disputes brought by the people. Jethro instructed Moses to appoint leaders over thousands, over hundreds, and over fifties and tens. In short, Jethro gave Moses an effective leadership model that would allow Moses to focus primarily on spiritual leadership, and not become physically overwhelmed (Ex. 18:21-23). Significantly, it was after this leadership model was implemented that God directed His people to leave Rephidim and journey to the desert of Sinai. It was here that God met with Moses and gave him the ten commandments, the ordinances and judgements, which form the foundation of all Hebraic law and culture, and indeed inform the "Western" judicial system in general.



Scripture Reading Response and Analysis

- How did God demonstrate His provision for Moses in the form of Jethro's council?
- What did the "Jethro principle" of leadership allow Moses to do?
- Which areas of your life and relationship with God is God asking you to focus on?

Into the Word:

1. Moses at Sinai and the Giving of the Law

The Israelites pitched their camp at the foot of Mount Sinai. Moses went up into the mountain and the voice of God spoke to him a sacred message of covenant and provision for the people from the mountain:

- Exodus 19:3-6 (NLT)
³ Then Moses climbed the mountain to appear before God. The Lord called to him from the mountain and said, "Give these instructions to the family of Jacob; announce it to the descendants of Israel:⁴ 'You have seen what I did to the Egyptians. You know how I carried you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. ⁵ Now if you will obey me and keep my covenant, you will be my own special treasure from among all the peoples on earth; for all the earth belongs to me. ⁶ And you will be my kingdom of priests, my holy nation.' This is the message you must give to the people of Israel."



Scripture Reading Response and Analysis

- According to Ex. 19-3-6 what promises does God give to the people of Israel?
- What earlier covenant does this promise reference?
- A covenant is a solemn and sacred agreement between two parties. Are these promises contingent, and what are they contingent upon?
- In which ways might this scripture be considered prophetic (see 1 Peter 2:9)?

Moses brought God's message before the leaders and the people. The people declared that they would do as God had commanded: they agreed to the covenant. Moses returned to the mountain where he carried the promise of the people to the Lord. God instructed Moses to sanctify the people of Israel for three days. They were commanded to wash their clothes and refrain from intimacy with their spouses. God instructed the people through Moses not to come up the mountain, or even touch its border until the trumpet sounded following the three days of purification.

After the third day, thunder and lightning began and a thick cloud descended upon the mountain. As the trumpet sounded Moses brought the people before God. The presence of the Lord fell on the mountain as fire, and the mountain began to smoke. The people became very fearful, moving back from the mountain. As Moses received the word of the Lord in the mountain, he returned to the people to deliver God's messages to the people. As mount Sinai continued

to smoke with the manifest presence of the Lord, the people became more afraid. They shrank from the presence of God and asked Moses to speak with the Lord on their behalf. They chose not to hear directly from Him. Struck with fear, they refused to draw near to the presence of God. (Ex. 20:19).



Scripture Reading Response and Analysis

- Why do you think the Lord chose to manifest his presence in the sound of the thunder and the fire and smoke on Mount Sinai?
- Although we can probably identify with the fear felt by the people, what do you think is the significance of their decision to retreat from the presence of God, and commune with him via Moses?
- Have you ever experienced the physical presence of the Lord in a supernatural way?
- Why do you think we have a tendency to shy away from the demonstrative presence of the Lord today?

The Lord gave Moses the Ten Commandments (the moral law), the Ordinances (the ceremonial or religious law) and the Judgments (the judicial law) at Sinai (Ex. 20-23:33). Exodus 20:22-23:19 is called "the Book of the Covenant".

The Ten Commandments read as follows (exodus 20:3-17):

1. You must not have any other god but me.
2. You must not make for yourself an idol of any kind or an image of anything in the heavens or on the earth or in the sea.
3. You must not misuse the name of the Lord your God.
4. Observe the Sabbath day by keeping it holy.
5. Honor your father and mother.
6. You must not murder.
7. You must not commit adultery.
8. You must not steal.
9. You must not testify falsely against your neighbor.
10. You must not covet your neighbor's house. You must not covet your neighbor's wife, male or female servant, ox or donkey, or anything else that belongs to your neighbor.

As Wayne S. Nelson comments in his Life Series on the Book of Exodus, the various passages in the Pentateuch¹ that list laws regarding lifestyle (Exodus 34:17-26; Leviticus 17:1-26:13; Deuteronomy 12:1-26:19) are mostly applications of the Ten Commandments to particular situations regarding "property rights,

¹ The first five books of the Bible: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy. These are the books of the law.

personal injuries, social justice, worshiping the Lord and respecting authority”(106). Nelson observes, “the laws in these codes are cast in two forms. One is simple and absolute (“Anyone who attacks his father or mother must be put to death”-21:15). The other is more complex and takes into account mitigating or aggravating circumstances (21:28-32 is an example of such “if...” laws)” (106).

Through this set of righteous decrees, judicial and religious laws, and definition of proportionate restitution, the Lord offered Israel “a law code that gave predictable, consistent guideline for rights, duties, and penalties” that was more sophisticated than any other law code in the Ancient Near East. He gave Israel a religious, legal and moral standard for regulating society. Additionally, God’s decrees “protected women and slaves from being used as property, and made justice the same for all social classes” (113-14).

The religious, legal and moral standards God laid before his people, Israel, outlined the way He desired them to live. If they followed His laws and obeyed His commandments, the Lord promised to drive out the pagan nations from the Promised Land. In Exodus 23: 20, God promises to send an angel with His Name (His character, the authority to represent His presence) to direct their path and bring them to the place He has prepared for them. Although during their first few days in the desert, God demonstrates His consistent provision, grace and mercy towards His people, He does require obedience from His people:

- Exodus 23:22 (NLT)
²² But if you are careful to obey him [the angel bearing His name], following all my instructions, then I will be an enemy to your enemies, and I will oppose those who oppose you.



Scripture Reading Response and Analysis

- In the Matthew 7: 12, Jesus articulates The Golden Rule, “Do to others whatever you would like them to do to you. This is the essence of all that is taught in the law and the prophets.” How do you see the Ten Commandments at work in this verse?
- Why do you think Jesus rebuked the people who demanded strict justice rather than granting love and mercy in their everyday dealings with their neighbors? Read the words of Jesus in Matthew 5: 17-48. How does Jesus Christ reconcile the relationship between the Old and New Testament understanding of justice in these verses? How does grace and mercy work in tandem with justice and judgment?

2. The Covenant is Ratified and the Rebellion of Israel

Exodus 24: 4 shows Moses writing “the book of the covenant” (24:7) in which he wrote all the words of the Lord. He then prepares a sacrifice and reads the book of the covenant to the people. After they agree to obey all that the Lord has said, Moses sprinkles the blood from the sacrifice over the people and proclaims:

- Exodus 24:8 (NLT)
Then Moses took the blood from the basins and splattered it over the people, declaring, “Look, this blood confirms the covenant the Lord has made with you in giving you these instructions.

This is a pivotal moment in Israel’s history. Moses and the people he leads confirm their acceptance of the the Lord’s decrees. God then summons Moses to return to Mount Sinai. And, although the Lord commands Aaron and his sons, along with the seventy elders of Israel to travel some of the distance with Moses and to worship the Him from a distance, He asks Moses alone to draw near to Him. Moses leaves Aaron and Hur in charge of the people as he climbs higher up the mountain to commune with God. The glory cloud of the Lord covers the mountain for six days, and on the seventh day the Lord calls Moses from the middle of the cloud and Moses enters the cloud and remains in the presence of the Lord for forty days and forty nights (Ex. 24: 14-18).

During this period God gives Moses the plan of the Tabernacle (meaning “tent,” “place of dwelling” or “sanctuary” --a sacred place where God chose to meet His people, the Israelites, during the 40 years they wandered in the desert under Moses’ leadership; it was the place where the leaders and people came together to worship and offer sacrifices) and ratifies His covenant with the Israelites by giving Moses the two tables of stone:

- Exodus 31:18 (NLT)
When the Lord finished speaking with Moses on Mount Sinai, he gave him the two stone tablets inscribed with the terms of the covenant, written by the finger of God.

Who can imagine the closeness Moses must have felt to the Lord as he received the manifest word of the Lord in his hands? Moses must have deeply experienced God’s overwhelming love for his people witnessed in the care and provision He exemplified in the meticulous detail of the Tabernacle plan and the religious, moral and legal statutes of His perfectly righteous law.

However, during Moses’ absence the Israelites grew impatient, fearful and carnal. Perhaps they thought that Moses would not return, and once more doubted the promises of God. In a similar way to Abraham and Sarah with regard to the birth of Hagar’s son, Ishmael, the people began to take matters into their own hands. Exodus 32 relates the tragic story of the golden calf. Under Aaron’s leadership, the people melted their jewelry (taken from the spoils of Egypt) and created a golden

idol in the shape of a calf. When the calf was completed, Aaron set an altar before it and declared the following day a feast day. They offered sacrifices to the calf and proclaimed the calf their deliverer in a wild frenzy of disobedience:

These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you out of the land of Egypt.
(32:18)

The Lord was so angry with the people that He declared to Moses that he would destroy them and fulfill His promise through Moses alone. This seems hard to reconcile with an eternally merciful and just God. However, the Lord was training Moses in spiritual leadership. Having been in God's presence for forty days and nights, Moses received the love of God for his people. Moses, therefore, interceded with God for the nation of Israel, in a manner which recalls Abraham's intercession for the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah. Before Moses descended the mountain, he petitioned the Lord to have mercy on the people of Israel (Ex. 32: 12-14). God needs leaders who will be intercessors for His people.

When Moses came down the mountain and saw with his physical what the people were doing, he became so angry that he threw and broke the tables of stone that God had given him. He took the calf and burnt it in the fire, ground it into dust, and then made the people drink it! Moses then demanded that whoever was on the Lord's side should stand by him; those that did not were killed by the sword. Moses then returned to mount Sinai ask God to forgive the people.



Scripture Reading Response and Analysis

- As we have seen Moses acted as a mediator between God and the people of Israel. How does Moses prefigure Jesus Christ in this context (1 Timothy 2:5)?

Conclusion:

This portion of the book of Exodus dramatizes the relationship between judgment and mercy. Obedience to the Lord is placing yourself under the protection of the His law. However, as the great story of the Bible unfolds, it proves impossible for the Israelites to keep every aspect of God's law, just as it is impossible for us to live a completely sin-free life in our own strength today. God, therefore, makes a way for our sins to be forgiven ultimately through the perfect sacrifice of Jesus Christ. It is His perfect sacrifice and His decision to take our sins upon himself on Calvary's cross that makes us righteous and allows us to enter God's presence. The plans God gives to Moses for the construction of His tabernacle at Mount Sinai prefigure the atoning and saving power of Jesus Christ. We will examine the layout and furnishings of the tabernacle, and their symbolic significance in the next lesson.