

HOLINESS OF THE LORD

PLEASE do not read these comments until you have read the Scripture for this lesson. First let the Holy Spirit teach you directly from His Word.

Moses concludes the book of the covenant here with a series of laws designed to promote justice within the commonwealth of Israel and exclusive allegiance to the LORD. In addition to the moral precepts, God expected Israel to observe certain sacred seasons and festivals. These were given both for spiritual and practical reasons. Although Israel received the law during her wilderness sojourn, it was given with a view to life in Canaan. Since the nation was comprised of twelve tribes and each would receive his own individual inheritance in Canaan, God anticipated the need for some provision of national unity. This was to be obtained through the three annual pilgrim feasts which brought all male Israelites to the central sanctuary. The three pilgrim feasts were Passover, Pentecost, and the Feast of Tabernacles. The covenant code concluded with God's assurance to Israel that He would fight their enemies and conduct them safely into the land of Promise in return for their undivided loyalty and obedience.

As is the case in any bilateral covenant, the terms needed mutual ratification to render them in force. The basic condition of the agreement obligated Israel to obey God's laws in order that she might receive God's abundant blessings. Moses rehearsed the contents of the covenant to Israel and she unanimously agreed to it. He then recorded it and allowed Israel to ratify it in documentary form. This they did and Moses sealed the covenant with blood. With the covenant sealed, Moses left Aaron and Hur in charge of the congregation and took Joshua with him to proceed up Mt. Sinai where he would meet with God to receive specific details of the law. Most significant among those instructions were the details concerning the construction of a tent of meeting where God would establish His residence among Israel. The construction of such a tabernacle did not make the LORD a localized deity like the gods of the heathen. The LORD still met His people elsewhere, but it provided a meeting place where He could be approached. The building materials were to be voluntarily contributed by the people from the wealth they had received when they left Egypt.

I. Covenant Conclusion - 23:1-33

A. Closing Precepts - 23:1-19

1. Miscellaneous statutes - 23:1-9

23:1 - This statement is an elaboration of the ninth commandment. It specifically forbids the origination of slander or participation with others in any type of slanderous activity.

23:2 - The preceding law is here applied to judges who are commanded not to follow the majority opinion if it contradicts justice.

23:3 - While the law protects the poor, justice must not be perverted in deference to them.

23:4-5 - Loving and doing what is good to one's enemies is not strictly a "Christian ethic." All men experiencing the mercy of God are expected to act mercifully toward others.

23:8 - Bribery is one of the greatest universal threats to justice (1 Sam 8:3). Samuel's sons were the classic illustration of such perversion.

23:9 - "You know the heart of the stranger" - Literally, the "mind." Having been strangers themselves (cf.22:21-27), they should be able to sympathize with others in that plight.

2. The law of the Sabbath - 23:10-13

23:10-11 - A sabbath of years was to be observed in Israel by allowing the ground to lie fallow every seventh year. The poor were allowed to harvest whatever grain grew voluntarily that year. This practice made good scientific sense since uninterrupted use would cause soil depletion. In addition to its humanitarian and scientific implications, the sabbath of years served a spiritual purpose. Just as God allowed Israel to gather a double portion of manna on the sixth day, He promised that the earth would yield enough during the sixth year to last for three years (Lev 25:20-21). Every seventh year, then, became an occasion for Israel to demonstrate her faith in God's ability to provide.

23:12 - This principle of the Sabbath day's rest is a restatement of the fourth commandment, but with an additional thrust. The emphasis here is on rest. It was to be a time of refreshment, literally "a drawing of breath" for all animals and personnel.

23:13 - "In all things...be circumspect" - Every one of these divine precepts was important and demanded the respect of every individual Israelite.

"Make no mention of the name of other gods" - Especially in that culture the greatest contempt for a person was shown by refusing to mention his name. Israel was not to tolerate pagan gods; she was to hate them. For Israel just to mention the name of a pagan god: (1) it acknowledged that pagan god's existence; (2) it gave it respectability, and (3) it diminished Israel's hatred for the abominations it represented (Josh 23:7).

3. Pilgrim festivals - 23:14-19

Once Israel was in possession of Canaan, the land was to be divided among the tribes. Lest they would develop into twelve independent nations, the law unified them around the central tabernacle by means of these three annual pilgrim feasts. Although it was important to preserve the theocratic character of the commonwealth, this politico-national expedient was not the primary intention of the feasts. Their major thrust was a religious one. By means of these feasts Israel was reminded three times each year that she belonged to the sanctuary; that she had entered into covenant with the LORD; that the land she lived on was not her own; and that the LORD deserved her homage and firstfruits of her harvest.

23:15 - "The feast of unleavened bread" - This feast was already ordained and the instructions pertaining to it were given in chapters 12-13. The only additional feature is the statement, "None shall appear before me empty." The three festivals coincided with Israel's harvest times. The Feast of Unleavened Bread came at the beginning of the barley harvest. The Feast of Weeks, or Pentecost, fell seven weeks later at the time of the wheat harvest. Ingathering, or Feast of Tabernacles, came in the fall season when the grapes and olives were being gathered in. Israel was to bring an offering of the firstfruits at each of these seasons in acknowledgement of the fact that all of their increase came from God. The Feast of Unleavened Bread commenced with the observance of the Passover which commemorated Israel's miraculous deliverance from Egypt. This was followed by seven days of eating unleavened bread which also served to remind Israel of their hasty exodus from Egypt. Furthermore, leaven symbolized sin and the putting away of leaven reminded Israel that they were to be a holy nation for God.

23:16 - "The feast of harvest" - This feast was observed fifty days after the offering of the barley sheaf. Because of this, it is referred to as the Feast of Pentecost (meaning "fiftieth") in the New Testament (Acts 2:1; 20:16; I Cor 16:8). It is also called the Feast of Weeks since it was observed the day after the seventh week following Unleavened Bread (Lev 23:15-16; Deut 16:9). It was a one-day joyful festival during which all Israel celebrated God's goodness and bountiful provision. The main ceremony involved the offering of two leavened loaves made with the finest flour from the wheat just harvested.

23:16b - "The feast of ingathering" - This feast was more commonly known as "the Feast of Tabernacles." It was given this title because the people were expected to dwell in small temporary booths erected for the duration of the festival (Lev 23:34; Deut 16:13; 31:10; Jn 7:2). The feast lasted eight days, beginning and ending with a holy convocation. It came at the end of the agricultural year and was marked with much joy and rejoicing because the final crops were safely in the storehouses.

23:18 - "My sacrifice" - No doubt this is a reference to the Passover lamb. Because it typified Messiah, it was in a special sense, "the LORD'S sacrifice." It was to be offered only after all leaven had been purged out of their homes (Ex 12:15).

23:19 - "You shall not seethe a kid in his mother's milk" - Not only was this a cruel outrage against nature, making the mother an accomplice to the death of her suckling, but it was also a practice of the Canaanites whose ritual was not to be imitated.

B. Comforting Promises - 23:20-33

1. Obedience to the LORD - 23:20-23 - God promised to send His Angel before the nation of Israel. The description of this Angel and Israel's relationship to Him makes it quite certain that this is none other than "The Angel of the LORD" or the second person of the God-head. This Angel would be the key to any success or victory Israel would experience.

2. Worship of the LORD - 23:24-26 - In return for this special favor of the Angel of the LORD, Israel was to utterly destroy every idol and cult object they encountered regardless of its artistic value. They were to cultivate a hatred for idolatry.

23:25-26 - Many personal benefits would accrue from such devotion: (1) they would be free from sickness; (2) they and their cattle would reproduce without miscarriage; (3) they would live long lives and not die prematurely.

3. Provisions from the LORD - 23:27-31 - "I will send my fear before you" - God promised to subdue Israel's enemies in Canaan by filling them with a divine panic. This is illustrated by the reaction of the Moabites (Num 22:3), the sentiments expressed by Rahab in Jericho (Josh 2:9, 11) and again in the ruse of the Gibeonites (Josh 9:3, 27).

23:28 - "I will send hornets before you" - Some have understood this to be a reference to the armies of Egypt who defeated the Hyksos and other inhabitants of Canaan shortly before the conquest. This theory is based on archaeological data which identifies the bee as the symbol of the Egyptian pharaohs. It is probably a poetic expression of the fact that God would cripple the Canaanite defenses by instigating a panic situation.

23:31 - The ideal boundaries of Israel's inheritance extended from the desert between Egypt and Palestine in the south all the way to the Euphrates River in the north, with the Mediterranean Sea

forming its western limitation. This area was possessed only for a short time under the reigns of David and Solomon (I Kgs 4:21, 24).

4. Warning from the LORD - 23:32-33 - Israel was not to make a covenant with the people of Canaan or with their gods because that would have allowed them to remain in the land and eventually become a snare to the Israelites. They were to be a holy people, completely separated unto the worship of the LORD. Any compromise with other gods would be a violation of the first commandment (20:3) and a grievous sin against the LORD.

II. Covenant Confirmation - 24:1-18

A. Publicly Ratified - 24:1-8

24:1-2 - When God finished communicating the Covenant Code to Moses He invited him to come up into the mount. God had given the Decalogue in a voice audible to the entire congregation, but they drew back in fear sending Moses to continue the dialogue for them (20:19-21). Moses probably received the covenant verbally at the base of Sinai.

24:3-4 - In order to finalize any covenant its terms needed to be publicly read and agreed upon. Upon Israel's agreement, Moses inscribed a provisional draft of the covenant and prepared for the covenant sacrifice.

24:5-8 - In ancient times, blood rituals were often involved in the making of covenants. They were probably tantamount to invoking death on the party who violated the covenant terms. In this case, the blood had a more theological significance. Moses, as the mediator of the covenant, offered God the blood of a pure lamb which was to atone for the sins of Israel. A sinful people and a holy God could make no agreements apart from this act. Moses sprinkled part of the blood on the altar symbolizing God's acceptance of the sacrifice and at the same time consecrating the altar as a place of meeting with God. The rest of the blood Moses sprinkled upon the people signifying the fact that the same blood that was shed for their atonement was also intended to consecrate them to covenant fellowship with God. This was an extremely significant sacrifice in the history of Israel. It was a renewal of life whereby Israel was sanctified unto God as "a peculiar people, a kingdom of priests, and a holy nation" (19:5-6).

"Blood of the covenant" - Note that the blood of the sacrificial lamb on this occasion became the seal of this covenant (now referred to as the old covenant or old testament). By contrast, the blood of Jesus Christ, slain as our sacrificial lamb, became the seal of the new covenant or new testament (Jn 1:29; compare Mt 26:28; I Cor 11:25; Heb 9:22).

B. Personally Received - 24:9-18

24:10 - "And they saw the God of Israel" - It is impossible for a human being, in the flesh, to see God in His divine essence (Ex 33:20; I Tim 6:16). Therefore, what Moses and the elders saw must have been one of God's unique self-revelations similar to those witnessed by Isaiah (6:1) and Ezekiel (1:26).

24:11 - "And did eat and drink" - Formal covenant arrangements were often concluded with a fellowship meal between the two parties (cf. Gen 32:44-45).

24:16 - "The glory of the LORD abode upon Mount Sinai" - literally, "dwelt." This word comes from the same root as the term "shekinah." Shekinah was a term used by Jewish rabbis to designate God's presence in the world as displayed by the fire on the top of Mount Sinai.

III. Covenant Worship - 25:1-40

Worship under the covenant was to revolve around a central meeting place. While the social and civil aspects were important, it was not fundamentally a place for meeting fellow-Israelites, but for a meeting with their covenant God.

A. Materials for the Sanctuary - 25:1-7

God specified a long list of costly items that were needed for the construction of the sanctuary. God asked Israel to contribute freely to this project from the wealth He had enabled them to acquire in conjunction with the exodus (12:35-36).

B. Purpose of the Sanctuary - 25:8

All nations erected temples to be inhabited by their local deities, but the purpose of this sanctuary was not to localize the LORD. The LORD of Israel could not be confined to an edifice (Acts 7:48). Rather, it was to serve as a place of meeting (29:43). It was a tangible representation of their worship and in that sense, served as a safeguard against idolatry. The ultimate value of the tabernacle was that God's glory filled it. Consequently, when Israel later forgot God and regarded the temple as just another cult center for the guarantee of their prosperity, God removed His presence from it (Ezek 9:3; 10:4, 18-19; 11:23).

C. Pattern of the Sanctuary - 25:9-40

Contrary to all pagan temples, the specifications of Israel's tabernacle were given by the God who would inhabit it (v. 9). This chapter deals specifically with three articles of furniture which would be used inside the tabernacle: the ark, the table of shewbread, and the golden candlestick (lamp stand).

1. The ark of the covenant - 25:10-22

The ark was the sole piece of furniture in the Holy of Holies and the most important object in the tabernacle proper. It was referred to by various names suggestive of its function: "the ark of the LORD" (I Sam 4:6); "the ark of God" (I Sam 4:18); "the ark of the testimony" (Ex 25:22); "the ark of the covenant of God" (Jud 20:27); "the ark of the LORD God" (I Kgs 2:26); etc. The Hebrew word for ark indicates a money coffer or chest.

25:17 - "A mercy seat of pure gold" - The word for mercy seat in Hebrew means "to cover." It was here that the high priest was to make reconciliation for Israel each year on the Day of Atonement. Christ objectified this symbol when He fully accomplished our reconciliation (compare Rom 3:26; Heb 9:5: "propitiation" and "mercy seat" come from the same Greek word).

25:19 - "Two cherubims of gold" - Actually the "im" ending in Hebrew indicates it is a plural word, so the "s" should not be added to cherubim. God had placed cherubim as guardians of the entrance to Eden following Adam's expulsion (Gen 3:24). Possibly these cherubim were symbolic guardians conveying the message that access to God's mercy seat was restricted.

2. The table of shewbread - 25:23-30

25:30 - "You shall set upon the table shewbread" - literally, "bread of the face" since it was to be presented before the face of God. Every Sabbath twelve loaves (one per tribe) were to be set out as a perpetual thank offering to God (Lev 24:5-9).

3. The golden candlestick - 25:31-40

Judging by its description, the lamp stand must have been the most ornate object in the tabernacle. In the technical sense it was a lamp stand and not a candlestick since oil was needed for its light (v. 6). The lamp stand served the very practical function of giving light to the priests as they carried out their daily ministrations in the tabernacle.