

Prayer

Great and powerful God, You have always known us better than we know ourselves. So, when You call us to do challenging things for You, may we not be so arrogant as to think we know what is best. Make our hearts submissive and willing to listen to what You have called us to do, trusting in Your wisdom and strength. Bless us with this godliness, we pray: AMEN

Other Prayer Suggestions

Weekly Theme: Water

Pray for countries like Bangladesh, with rising or changing water levels that disrupt people's lives and livelihoods. Ask God to give us a better grasp of how to manage our environment.

On-going prayers

- *Pray about the issue of wasteful packaging and its consequences*
- *Give thanks for the joy of doing the Lord's work, and doing it well*
- *Pray for those who are unemployed, with little prospect of finding jobs*

Meditation

Look at God's people, and see success, not failure!

See those who have given their lives to Christ,
And follow Him always, whatever the cost.

See those who desire is to know God's Word,
And read it sufficiently to feed their souls.

See those who pray to seek the heart of God,
And intercede for others, whatever the cost.

See those who stand firmly on the rock of Christ,
And who share their testimony for the benefit of all.

See those who yearn for God's Kingdom come,
And live by faith until Christ Jesus returns.

Look at God's people, and be inspired by their faith.

Bible Study - Exodus 34:17-26

¹⁷ You must not make for yourselves cast idols.

¹⁸ You must hold the festival of Unleavened Bread. You must eat unleavened bread for seven days as I instructed you, at the appointed time in the month of Abib, for this is when you came out of Egypt.

¹⁹ Everything that opens the womb belongs to me; all your male livestock, including the firstborn of the herd or of sheep. ²⁰ You must redeem the firstborn of a donkey with a lamb, or if you will not redeem it you shall break its neck. You must redeem all your firstborn sons.

No one is to appear before me empty-handed.

²¹ You may work for six days, but on the seventh day you must rest; you must rest even in ploughing time and in harvest time.

²² You must observe the Festival of Weeks, the first fruits of wheat harvest, and then the Festival of Ingathering at the turn of the year. ²³ Three times in the year all your males shall appear before the LORD God, the God of Israel. ²⁴ For I will drive out the nations before you to give you a larger territory; no one shall covet your land when you go up to appear before the LORD your God three times in the year.

²⁵ You must not offer the blood of my sacrifices with anything leavened, and the fat from my festivals must not be left overnight until the morning.

²⁶ You must bring the best of the first-fruits of your land to the house of the LORD your God.

You must not boil a kid in its mother's milk.

Review

Yesterday, we read about the Lord's promised covenant renewal for His people. This was necessary because after the granting of the Law and the giving of the Ten Commandments on two tablets of stone (31:18), God's people had sinned by worshipping a golden calf, and effectively broken their covenant relationship with God. This was symbolised dramatically when Moses broke the two tablets of stone (32:19). Now, after the aftermath of this sin and the repentance of the people who needed their God (ch. 33), the Lord led Moses, their leader, to renew their covenant while he was with the Lord on top of Mount Sinai. The first part of His speech (34:10-16) was based around the first of the Ten Commandments given in Exodus 20:1f.; 'you must worship no other God ...' (34:14).

Our passage today continues from this first and most important commandment by adding nine other pronouncements or 'words', each making a specific point, like the ten Commandments, but certainly not the same. I have summarised the commandments from Exodus 20 and Exodus 34 below for your comparison:

Exodus 20	Exodus 34
1. No other God	No other God
2. Do not make an idol	Do not make an idol
3. Do not use the Lord's name wrongly	Hold the feast of Unleavened Bread
4. Keep the Sabbath	All first born are the Lord's and must be redeemed
5. Honour your parents	No one is to appear before God empty handed
6. Do not murder	Keep the Sabbath
7. Do not commit adultery	Observe festivals three times a year
8. Do not steal	Do not offer blood with sacrifices
9. Do not bear false witness	Bring the best of your first fruits
10. Do not covet	Do not boil a kid in its mother's milk

A quick glance at these two lists shows that there are three similar commands, the first two, and the command to keep the Sabbath; though the Sabbath is described in a different way in each text. The main difference between the two lists is that all the 'social' laws within the original Ten Commandments have been replaced with religious laws virtually copied from Exodus 23:13-19! If you would like to check out how these verses connect with Exodus 23, please read the 'translation notes' below.

In summary, the added commands in Exodus 34 identify three occasions when Israel must 'appear before the Lord'; the Feast of Unleavened Bread, the Festival of Weeks (or, the First Fruits), and the Festival of Ingathering. As we saw in yesterday's study, the reasons for these festive occasions are split between remembrance of the past (Unleavened Bread) and anticipation of the future blessing of the Promised Land (Weeks and Ingathering). God's blessing on Israel for gathering three times will be that the other nations will respect this awesome religious devotion, and no one will then 'covet' the land for themselves! We are left to wonder whether the world would be a different place today if God's people had fulfilled this obligation!

The other regulations or commandments include instructions about sacrifices, including the redeeming of the firstborn, a practice associated with the Exodus from Egypt (34:20), and the instruction not to offer blood with sacrifices because it represents life (which is holy to the Lord – 34:25). It also includes the strange instruction not to boil a kid in its mother's milk (34:26 - see later study for further explanation). In addition to this, there are two interesting commands about worship; not to appear before the Lord 'empty handed', and to bring the Lord the best, in the form of the 'first fruits' of a crop.

While other parts of the law explain the social obligations of God's people to one another (for example, Exodus 21,22, Leviticus 19 and the second half of the 'Ten Commandments'), the emphasis here is on the need for God's people to be focussed on their God. This, after all, is about the renewal of a covenant between a people and their God, and in this light, it makes perfect sense for the commands here to reflect the uniqueness of the relationship between God and His people.

Going Deeper

The Bible study continues with further information about the following subjects:

- How do the commands found in both Exodus 20 and Exodus 34 differ, and why?
- How do the commands found in both Exodus 23 and Exodus 34 differ, and why?

- What can we learn about the Covenant between God and His people from this list?

Notes on the text and translation

- V18** ***'You shall keep the feast of Unleavened Bread ...'** This whole verse is virtually word for word the same as Exodus 23:15, except the last sentence of Ex. 23:15 is 'no one shall appear before me empty handed', which in this passage, is found at the end of verse 20.*
- V19** ***'Everything that opens the womb belongs to me ...'** his is very similar to Exodus 13:12*
- V20** ***'You must redeem the firstborn of a donkey ...'** This is the same as Exodus 13:13*
- V21** ***'You will work for six days, but on the seventh day you must rest.'** This is the same as Exodus 23:12 (first part).*
- V22** ***'You must observe the Festival of Weeks'** The term 'weeks' is a very specific term referring to the time seven weeks after the festival of Passover; it is the occasion we call 'Pentecost'. This is the second festive occasion mentioned in this text (the first is 'Unleavened Bread' – see v18), and the 'Festival of Weeks' is the first fruits of the harvest. Much of this verse is found in Exodus 23:16*
- V23** ***'Three times in the year all your males shall appear before the LORD God'** This is the same as Exodus 23:17*
- V25** ***'You shall not offer the blood of my sacrifice with leaven.'** This verse parallels (partly) Exodus 23:18*
- V26** ***'The best of the first fruits of your ground you shall bring to the house of the LORD.'** This verse is the same as Exodus 23:19, including the final comment about not boiling a kid in its mother's milk.*

Going Deeper

How do the commands found in both Exodus 20 and exodus 34 differ, and why?

There are three commandments that are common to Exodus 20 and Exodus 34. These are:

1. Do not have other Gods
2. Do not make idols
3. Observe the Sabbath

In Exodus 20, the first Commandment is stated briefly (20:3), and the Israelites were told to believe in one God because He had saved them from Egypt (20:2). As we saw yesterday (34:10-16), the first in the second set of Commandments was urged on the Israelites so that they might believe in the promise of God that they would take possession of the Promised Land. The combination of the two encourages God's people to look with faith both backwards and forwards; it is a simple message, and we have already explored this.

The second command in Exodus 20 is given more space. The Commandment, 'You must not make for yourself an idol ...' is followed by some examples of objects that cannot represent God, the earth, the heavens and the waters, for example (20:4). After this, Exodus 20 describes the character of God saying; 'I, the Lord, am a jealous God, punishing the children for the sin of their parents to the third and the fourth generation ... but showing steadfast love to the thousandth generation ...' (20:5,6). All of this material is covered already in Exodus 34 through the description of God's character given in 34:6,7 and 34:14. Logically, nothing more need be said, and after the sin of the Israelites in making an idol of a golden calf for themselves (32:1f.), it would seem unnecessary to say more. It should come as no surprise therefore that in Exodus 34, the second command simply says 'you must not make for yourselves cast idols'. This suggests that this second list was not put together accidentally, or even put together simply by copying from one text to the other. There are reasons for what has been written.

The last of the Commandments in common between Exodus 20 and 34 is the law to observe the Sabbath. In Exodus 20, the Sabbath is described as a day of rest in honour of God, who rested on the seventh day of Creation. However, in Exodus 34, the Commandment is described in a different way. It assumes that people know why they should honour the Sabbath, but adds a ruling apparently in anticipation of the people of Israel's occupation of the Promised Land. They did not plough and reap in the desert, though the skills of agriculture were embedded in them as they were in all ancient peoples. As they travelled in the desert they were dependent on the Lord for food, but when they came to Canaan, they would need to engage in agriculture again, and a natural question would then arise. Would the Israelites be allowed to work on the Sabbath at those key moments of the year when continuous working was normally required; at sowing and reaping? The Lord's answer through this command was 'no'. The Israelites would be distinct through their absolute commitment to God, and their faith that He would provide even at such critical times. He was the Lord of sowing and harvesting.

How do the commands found in both Exodus 23 and Exodus 34 differ, and why?

Apart from the three commandments mentioned above, most of those found in Exodus 34 are remarkably similar to those mentioned in Exodus 23. I will not go over the full explanation of these laws here, and for this you will have to read my notes on that text (Exodus 23:10-19). Why would they be mentioned here in this list? One answer to this question is that by giving Moses these laws in the context of their covenant renewal, the Lord was asking the people of Israel to look forward to the future promised them in Canaan. Most of the commandments are about the round of festivals and celebrations that accompany the agricultural year, and what is said here would only be relevant when Israel settled in Canaan, just as we saw in the Sabbath commandment. This makes sense, given that the big issue ever since the beginning of Exodus 33 has been whether the people felt able to continue their journey from Sinai to the Promise Land. The Israelites had made a mess of their festivities when worshipping the golden calf, but the Lord wanted them to enjoy their celebrations at harvest festivals when they reached Canaan. Remember, at this stage, only a relatively short journey was envisaged, going straight there. The tragedy of wandering for forty years only came later (see Numbers 13,14).

If you compare the instructions given here in Exodus 34 with what is given in Exodus 23, you will find one major difference. Exodus 34 contains an elaboration on the commandment to appear before the Lord three times a year. In verse 24 (of our reading), we are told that the Lord will drive out the nations before the Israelites, using language that is reminiscent of what we read in yesterday's passage (34:10-16). This confirms our opinion that these commandments have been given to focus the minds of the Israelites on the journey ahead, but there is also one small additional point made, as if in answer to a question. People might well have asked; 'if everyone is required to assemble before God three times a year, surely our lands will be vulnerable and undefended while we are away?' The reply is given that if the people trust God and do what He says, then the Lord will defend the land; 'no one will covet your land ...' (34:24).

Two verses are not covered in what we have said so far, and these are verses 19 and 20. The commandments given here come not from Exodus 23 but from Exodus 13. These remind the Israelites of both the past and the future. They were commands given about the first-born belonging to the Lord, given when the Israelites came out of Egypt, and needing therefore to be bought back from the Lord with the price of redemption. The commandment began at the Exodus and would be carried on throughout Israel's history when they came into the Promised Land.

What can we learn about the Covenant between God and His people from this list?

The covenant between God and His people is one that will change and grow over time as His will is revealed in the different circumstances of the future. Of course, this motivated the Israelites, and Jewish people after the time of the Exile, to try and reinterpret the laws of God for their times. There are writings of 'Mishnah' and 'Talmud' that attempt to do just this, and the Pharisees had an extensive range of laws by which they sought to interpret the laws of God to their age. What these later generations failed to do, was to maintain the basic principles of God's dynamic involvement in human life, for once they had made rules, they were written down and 'set in stone'. In reality, only one set of commandments were 'set in stone' and these were the Ten Commandments themselves, from Exodus 20. If these people had fully appreciated the dynamic of God found within what we are now studying, they would have realised that the thousands of laws in existence in Jesus' day (for example) were not an expression of God's will, but human will.

Jesus objected to the laws of the Pharisees on these grounds, yet was still able to say that not one item of the law of the Old Testament would become invalid; indeed He would fulfil them (Matt 5:17 etc.). This is a message that we do well to remember when seeking to make church 'law' today. Those churches that ask us to believe that their laws are inviolable make their claims on 'shifting sands', as the Bible itself makes clear in both the New and the Old Testaments.

Application

We tend to think of the Lord's requirement as static; 'do this', or do 'not do that'! Of course, a commandment will always contain such language, but reading this passage and comparing it to the other lists of Commandments given to the people of Israel suggests that the Lord is perfectly aware that we need to different guidelines for different circumstances. Some of these remain the same and do not change, and it is interesting that the Commandments that do not change between this passage and the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20) are the basic laws of belief in God. He is one God, who cannot be known through 'idols', but can be known through copying what He has done, that is, by observing the Sabbath. Everything else has changed; but it remains true to this day that the starting point for Christian faith is a belief in one God, who made the world. Of course, Christians spend a great deal of time honouring Jesus Christ who has revealed the redeeming and saving work of God that grants people access to God, but if people do not believe in this God in the first place, then the Gospel has little appeal. The point should be born in mind when engaging in evangelism!

The commandments in this passage point back and they point forward, and in this passage, they tend to point forward far more than back. Surely, this has a message for us today. As Christians, what we do and how we do it says something about our faith in God for the future. If we simply continue doing the same things day after day, then we say to the rest of the world that God is boring and there is nothing more to do. Frankly, few people will be interested in church life that is repetitive and boring, and the idea that this represents a God who is dynamically interested in and engaged in the world in which we live is far-fetched. The Lord God is constantly challenging His people to take the heritage He has given and use it in a vision for the future that He provides. All it takes is for us to be open to renew our covenant with the Lord not out of habit but out of necessity (because we are sinful people), and be guided by Him into His exciting future. Many young people are dying, quite literally, for want of a vision of God's future in which they are dynamically engaged in the things of God. If our worship can convey this, then people will be enthused about the God about whom we testify.

Questions (for use in groups)

1. Discuss in your group the religious obligations required by your church, to do with being a member of the church, or regular worship, for example. How important are these things?
2. Does this passage highlight any features of religious devotion that are applicable today; if so, which ones?
3. Why does worship and how it is done raise so many deep emotions within people today? Are our strong feelings justified?

Discipleship

Personal comment:

This passage of Scripture reminds me that the Bible is not as monochrome as some people like to paint it. This whole passage is about ten instructions which are modelled on the Ten Commandments, but different, gathered together from a number of places within Scripture for a specific purpose. It invites us to think creatively about how we use the many instructions and religious forms of advice and assistance offered to us in the Bible. I have always believed that if people have the opportunity to read larger chunks of the Bible than the small sections we hear expounded on Sundays, then they will make more connections between different aspects of their faith, and put together the things they hear more creatively and helpfully under the guidance of God's Holy Spirit.

Ideas for exploring discipleship

- *Take the first four of the Ten Commandments, and write down a further six, made up of texts from the New testament that you think reflect the proper worship of the Living God, in thanks for the saving work of Jesus Christ. Does what you produce have any more importance than being just a personal exercise of faith?*
- *Pray about the way that little children are taught about faith, and pray that they will be enabled to learn and understand the Bible and some of its important stories, poems and sayings.*

Final Prayer

Lord God, You are in our fingers as we write, in our lips as we speak, in our hands as we work, in our eyes as we see and in our hearts as we decide what to do with each moment of a day. Bless us we pray, and lead us ever onwards to trust in You, King of Kings and Lord of Lords! AMEN
