

Prayer

Come, Lord Jesus, and heal the sick amongst us. Heal the sick of mind who do not understand what life has done to them. Heal the sick of body who suffer with conditions they cannot handle. Heal the sick of heart who long for peace and cannot find it. Heal the sick of spirit who do not know if they can trust in You. Heal all of us who are sick, we pray: AMEN

Prayer Suggestions

Prayer ideas

Each time you use electricity or other forms of power, think about the work of the Holy Spirit, and ask Him to empower your life.

On-going prayers

- **Pray for the police.** *Pray for those who govern the security and law enforcement agencies of your country*
- *Pray for the United Kingdom after the recent election*
- *Give thanks to God for close friends*

Meditation

Brothers and sisters in Christ,
We are bound together in life.

We share the common humanity
Of all peoples and nations everywhere.

We share a common sickness
Of the sins and offences of humanity.

We share a common hope
Of salvation through faith in Christ.

We share a common goal
Of holiness, by the grace of God.

We share a common work
Of service to each other, for our Lord.

We share a common destiny
Of all who stand together in Christ.

Brothers and sisters in Christ,
We are bound together in life and in eternity.

Bible passage – Exodus 22:18-31

¹⁸ Do not allow a sorceress to live.

¹⁹ Anyone who has sex with an animal shall be put to death.

²⁰ Whoever sacrifices to any god other than the LORD alone, must be destroyed.

²¹ Do not abuse a resident stranger or oppress him, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.

²² Do not abuse any widow or orphan. ²³ If you do indeed mistreat them so that they have to cry out to me, then I will certainly heed their cry; ²⁴ my anger will be aroused, and I will kill you with the sword, and your wives will become widows and your children orphans.

²⁵ If you lend money to my people, to any of the poor among you, do not be like a moneylender; do not take interest from them.

²⁶ If you should ever take the coat of your neighbour as a pledge, you must restore it to him before the sun goes down; ²⁷ for this may be the only clothing he has to cover himself; what else will he sleep in? Then, if he cries out to me I will listen, for I am compassionate.

²⁸ Do not treat God with contempt, or curse a leader of your people.

²⁹ Do not hold back the offering of your full harvest or the first juice of your winepresses. You must give me your firstborn sons. ³⁰ Do the same with your cattle and with your sheep: it will remain with its mother for seven days, and on the eighth day you must give it to me.

³¹ You shall be a people who are holy to me; therefore you must not eat any meat that is mangled by wild beasts, you must throw it to the dogs.

Bible Study

Review

Today, because of its importance, we will study the whole of this passage. In contrast to the previous laws that state the punishment for breaking one or other of the Ten Commandments, these regulations appear at first to be random. However, this is unlikely to be the case, given the care with which Exodus has been put together.

The rules we find here can be identified by the direct instructions, '*do not ...*' or '*you shall ...*', and if we add them up we will find they number ten! In the rest of the law in Exodus we sometimes find groups of 10, 7 or 3, and in each case, this is likely to be the result of ancient teaching methods designed to group laws and regulations together for the purpose of learning. It is unlikely that this particular group of ten rules was intended to reflect the Ten Commandments themselves, but they were clearly grouped together for some purpose, and we need to think about what this might be.

Remarkably, and in a manner quite different from the other regulations found in Exodus 21-23, the regulations in this passage reflect the distinct character and image of God. The first three crimes (22:18-20) are a direct offence against God's 'image', and because of their seriousness, they incur capital punishment. The sorceress is a substitute for God (22:18), sex with an animal (22:19) is an abuse of God's 'image' as defined by Genesis (Gen 1:27,28, 2:24), and the worship of other gods is an affront to the One true God, and is banned by the second Commandment (22:20).

The next series of regulations (22:21-27) are social laws, and they require that God's people copy Him and give Him due worship and respect. God listens to the poor and acts to protect their interests (22:24,27), so people must not behave differently. Then, they must not treat God with contempt, or disrespect their leaders (22:28), and they must worship God by giving Him of their best (22:29,30). Lastly, God's people are to be holy and refrain from anything that would make them impure, for example, by eating something that has not died naturally or sacrificially (22:31 – for ancient people, savaging by animals was violent and therefore not regarded as natural).

This all makes for a simple analysis and we will explore this further later in the study. However, although this group of laws stands together, it cannot be said to represent a complete system of social law. There must surely be more, for example, the people needed more instructions about land rights, the use of money, work, worship and personal behaviour, to name but a few of the areas of law we might expect. We can certainly find these things in the other books of the 'law' such as Leviticus and Deuteronomy, so this still begs the question, why are these laws grouped together in this way?

One helpful suggestion is that these regulations together with the others in this part of Exodus (chapters 21-23), were examples of law used by Israel's appointed judges (18:22) as 'standards' or 'precedents', which enabled them to make judgements about a wide variety of other related matters. Yesterday, we discovered that God's laws were proportionate, and punishments for serious theft attracted higher penalties than crimes that could not be proved. So if these regulations set the standards, then judges would have to apportion punishment for related crimes accordingly, and in a proportionate way. For example, the punishment for deviant sex (22:19) is an extreme punishment for an extreme and revolting sexual act, but not all sexual crimes attracted the death penalty and were judged proportionately, as can be seen by the list of later punishment found in Leviticus 18.

All of us tend to work things out according to principles, and I suggest that these laws are principled standards, and they are not intended to be comprehensive law. Once we understand this, the passage becomes much more readable and understandable. Moreover, it reminds us strongly that we need to get our principles and standards right, and make sure that are based on the character of God. Then we can present them to all people as a true reflection of the God who made the world.

Going Deeper

The Bible study goes deeper to look at these issues:

- Why do the first three regulations require the penalty of death (22:18-20)?
- What do the rules for strangers widows and orphans mean (22:21-24)?
- What do the rules for money lending and coats mean (22:25-27)?
- How do God's people reflect their relationship with Him in real life (22:28-31)?

Notes on the text and translation

- V20** *'... must be destroyed.'* The Hebrew word for destroyed is 'cherem', the word used throughout the Old Testament for something that is handed over to God for destruction. The idea is a difficult one for us today, but comes from the incompatibility between the holiness of God and the impurity of earthly things.
- V21** *'you shall not wrong a resident stranger ...'* The Hebrew word for a 'resident stranger' is 'ger', and it refers to someone who is of a different nationality who chooses to live in Israel. You will find that Bibles use different phrases to express this concept, 'alien', 'resident alien', 'sojourner', for example.
- V23** *'If you do indeed mistreat them so that they have to cry out to me ...'* There are three Hebrew phrases in the whole of this verse. Each of them contains a specific Hebrew construction in which the verb is doubled (literally, 'if you mistreat to mistreat them so that they cry out to cry out to me ...'), creating great emphasis. Most translations indicate this by a small amount of emphasis on one of the clauses, but the emphasis should be present in each clause, as here.
- V24** *'My anger will be aroused.'* Some Bible versions have 'my wrath will burn ...' but although this is a very strong expression of anger, it does not use the usual Hebrew word for hot anger ('charon') that is translated 'wrath' elsewhere in the Old Testament.
- V25** *'do not take interest from them'* The Hebrew word here is 'neshek', which is normally translated 'usury'. This means a portion of something that is removed, and in the case of money, this is equivalent to what we mean by interest.
- V26** *'if you should ever take ...'* This is another example of the double use of the Hebrew verb to give emphasis ('if you take a pledge to take a pledge ...'). I have given the phrase emphasis in English perhaps more so than found in other translations.
- V28** *'do not treat God with contempt...'* Some Bible versions have 'do not curse God', but the word for curse is not used here. The Hebrew uses a forceful form of a word that means to treat something in a trifling manner.
- V29** *'Do not hold back the offering of your full harvest'* The Hebrew simply says 'do not hold back your full harvest', but what it speaks about is the offering to God of the first portion of the harvest. The writer is writing 'shorthand' for the sake of poetry.
- V29** *'...the first juice of your winepresses'* As in the first half of the verse, the writer is writing poetically, and he only says 'and your trickling juice'. However, this refers to the offering of the 'must', the first juice that comes from the wine-press before it is trodden; so I have translated it accordingly.

Going Deeper

Why do the first three regulations require the penalty of death (22:18-20)?

The death penalty is extreme, and many will have significant problems with this. However, we have already discovered in these studies that not only are God's rules just, but Jesus has taken the punishments Himself through His own death and resurrection; so we do not have to bear the weight of God's justice as defined here, or apply it literally. Without the Gospel, our study would imply the intolerable and we would dismiss the passage as having little significance for us. As it is, we may gain significant help through studying them and asking why they are so abhorrent to God.

Verse 18 says; 'do not allow a sorceress to live.' This begs many questions, for example, what are we to say about male sorcerers? What about other magic arts (see Deuteronomy 18:9-14)? The word 'sorcerer' means someone who practices magic arts, by which we mean attempting to find out what the gods think by human means. This includes all kinds of astrology, divination and necromancy (contacting the dead), so as a 'catch all' word, and because of this, the regulation deals with magic arts in general. It is more difficult to work out why female sorcerers alone are mentioned, but there are hints from archaeology and other ancient texts that women were the main protagonists of sorcery in ancient times, and in Moses' day, it may have been natural to speak generally of a 'sorceress'. God imposes the death penalty because sorcery is an attempt to replace Him with a substitute; it is an abhorrence to God, and remains so.

Sex with an animal is also abhorrent (22:19), but I suggest that we do not need to emphasise the particular sin in attempting to understand what is being said here. In sex, God has made something incredibly beautiful and loving, so much so that people are created through it. It is hard to think of anything more amazing apart perhaps from birth itself. God is deeply involved with both the love of a man and a woman and the creation of a child in the womb, and the idea that sex should be pursued as a form of self expression or personal gratification is profoundly sad. God has given us sex, and the abuse of the gift is an awful blight on humanity and an insult to God.

The worship of other gods (22:20) is in direct contravention of the second Commandment, and it is not surprising that a fearsome penalty is prescribed. However, as we have indicated above, we are not called to exact God's vengeance. We have a Saviour in Christ, but we do need to understand the gravity of the sin without His intervention.

What do the rules for strangers widows and orphans mean (22:21-27)?

The first two social rules instruct God's people not to abuse or mistreat first the 'resident stranger', and then widows and orphans. Such people appear throughout the Old Testament representing those on the edges of Israelite society. Here, they illustrate two essential characteristics of God, His inclusiveness and His concern for the poor.

For a definition of a 'resident stranger', refer to the translation notes above. The 'resident stranger' in Israel is a constant reminder that God is not exclusive in his love. Throughout the Old Testament the history of God's people unfolds almost as if His exclusive interest is in them alone; but this impression is false. The Old Testament reveals that God's purpose is to show Himself to the world through His people, and God's inclusion of the 'resident stranger' in the laws of Israel and its worship (see Ex 12:48) demonstrates this. It was essential for God's plan of salvation that people of other nationalities lived within Israel, and the failure of God's people to accept this was a major problem.

The phrase 'widow and orphan' has come down to us today as a definition of those in need at the bottom of the social 'pile'. The truth is that in ancient societies based on extended families and led by men, widows and orphans were by far the most vulnerable of people and often became outcast. It has been said that 'a nation may be judged by the quality of its care for the poor', and to the best of my knowledge, this has been said by a number of famous people. However, God said this first to His people, and it part of His self revelation to the world. God is concerned for the poorest, and none of us should forget this. In fact, the verse in which this is said (verse 23 – see notes above) stresses the point with a 'double emphatic' form of phraseology used no less than three times! The dreadful punishment God gives for this offence sounds awful, but it follows the basic principle of 'like for like'. God will make 'widows and orphans' out of the relatives of those who offend.

We must remind ourselves here that the principle of proportionality means that a judge would use this regulation to estimate the actual penalty to be given for various offences committed in not assisting others; and there is no evidence of judges 'handing down' the death penalty. The rule was used as a 'standard' by judges, and God was to be respected as the sole authority over life and death.

What do the rules for money lending and coats mean (22:25-27)?

The rules for money lending or lending a coat are slightly different from the previous rulings, because they begins with a conditional phrase and continue on in this way, 'if ... do not ...' (rather than the simple 'do not ...' used previously). This gives the ruling a different feel, and in addition, God's response is quite different. No death penalty is given (22:27), but God declares His compassion and care, 'if he cries out to me I will listen, for I am compassionate' (22:27)! This is strange because the basic issues are still the treatment of the poor and disadvantaged, in this case those who need money. However, whilst the previous verses (22:21-24) illustrate the punishment of offenders, these verses (22:25-27) illustrate compassion and care for victims! So by implication, 'law' in Israel showed concerned for victims, as well as punishing the offender, and God surprises us with regulations far in advance of what we might have expected one and a half thousand years before Christ!

Both the instances of poverty concern money. In the first (22:25), a ruling is made about lending money, forbidding the taking of interest! This would be impossible today, for our society can only continue if monetary systems do just this. However, what God envisages here is the lending of money to a friend or a neighbour, and what He abhors is the rich taking advantage of the poor.

The picture painted in verse 26 is hardly different, describing a poor man pawning his cloak in a state of extreme poverty, when in need of money. The money is given by a neighbour in exchange for the cloak (the outer garment), but the ruling says that the garment must be returned at night so the poor man may sleep, even if it is taken again in the morning. The neighbour must therefore show mercy by servicing the need of the poor man without compromising his dignity, and to do this is to reflect Godliness (22:27).

As with the previous laws, a judge dealing with a particular case would therefore have to deal with things proportionately (as in 21:24). Here, compassion for the victim must be accounted for in judgement, proportionate to what has happened (22:25-27). We do not know the details of how such help would be offered, but the principle is remarkably advanced. If you read these laws quickly you will not find this important detail; you have to be willing to follow Exodus through several chapters and ensure that you follow what each section means before you will find it!

How do God's people reflect their relationship with Him in real life (22:28-31)?

The last section deals with the relationship between God and His people at a different level. The first part (22:28) reads like an alternative form of the third Commandment; 'you shall not use the name of the Lord your God in vain'; though it is interesting to see that treating God with contempt is described as similar to cursing a leader (22:28). You may say that the part about the leader is a different point. However, in Hebrew thought (as reflected mostly within the Psalms), the first and the second half of a sentence frequently 'parallel' each other, adding meaning to what is said, or giving an illustration. This is why we can say that the cursing of a leader is like contempt for God; and we would be advised to remember this ruling when criticising our leaders!

The principal way in which the relationship between God with His people is compromised is when people stand back from honouring Him in worship. Verses 29 and 30 do not mention not sacrifice, but more significantly, the withholding of offerings to God, significantly the 'first-fruit' of a grain or grape harvest. Such offering is important to God, because it respects His authority over all life, which is also reflected in the practice of offering Him the first-born of all life. The principle is easy to understand, but again, we should remember that these rulings helped local communities define their priorities. No punishment is offered as if lack of worship could be defined as a 'crime', and this is because people either worship God because they know it is right, or they do not because they do not wish to honour Him, and reap their own reward. Nevertheless, a community must know what is required, and what is expected of them.

God is holy (22:31), and He wants His own people to be holy, like Him. No punishment can make this happen, and no judge can enforce this. People either follow God's laws and are holy or they do not follow them and remain outside His will and care.

Application

Each part of this complex set of laws has something to say to us. We should certainly pay attention to what this says about astrology, spiritualism and sorcery, for these things thrive today. We like to think that they mean little and are of no consequence in the grander scheme of things, but they not only lead people astray, they sometime affect God's people. Saul, in his worst moment, sought the advice of a medium (1 Sam 28:7), and there are plenty of church people today who because of extremes of emotion caused by sickness or bereavement, succumb to various magic arts, even if they do not know them to be wrong. I have personally come across those who have struggled with alternative medicines, read the stars, and consulted the dead. We do well to expose these things as not of God, so that the help God can give will be made clear.

We could continue through the list, reminding ourselves, for example, of the problems of sexual gratification fed by internet pornography, and its dreadful consequences on the human soul and spirit. The passage also reminds us of the abuse of people who attempt to migrate legally or illegally, the continued tragedy of those who are bereaved, whether young or old, and so much more. Each issue in our passage speaks to a problem in our own society that any of us could discuss at length. We may not be able to appreciate what the issue of 'first-fruits' has to say, because we are unfamiliar with this, but the principle of worship lying beneath this is nevertheless highly significant.

Perhaps more than anything else, we can take from this passage the thought that if we place our hope for justice on human legal systems or on politicians, then we are likely to be sorely disappointed. It is fascinating to watch newspaper or TV reports of people's expectations when a new leader is elected in some country. People's expectations are always that the new leader will right the wrongs of the past, and bring

more to the poor. How often they are disappointed! Yet God can help us deal with the difficult social problems of our day if we will let Him. He is justly proportionate in His response to each human situation, He can lead us through the social ills of our day, and He can offer us timeless advice on how to deal with issues compassionately and fairly. All it takes is for us to have the courage to read what God says to us here in Exodus, and keep listening.

Discipleship

Questions *(for use in groups)*

1. In the opinion of your group, which of the laws in this passage are the most important for today?
2. Discuss the meaning of the death penalty in this found passage, and whether you accept the interpretation given in this study.
3. What does this passage say, if anything, about the way we worship God?

Personal comments by author

I find it daunting to read this passage because it touches on such an important range of issues. The one part of it that challenges me is the implication that the penalty for falling foul of God's laws in this world are always capital. It is like a stern reminder that the penalty of sin is death! When we hear this said, we all say 'Yes' because it is part of our Christian theology. It is harder to say when made specific, like here! Yet the same answer applies, and this is Jesus. It is a crucial part of God's message.

Ideas for exploring discipleship

- *Reflect on the sins of this world that cause the greatest grief and guilt amongst people. What would God say about them now? Pray about this and ask the Lord to show you how He would respond to today's problems.*
 - *Pray for the poor of the world, and pray for a just and proportionate response to their needs by the world and its leaders. Pray also for the churches of this world to respond to social justice issues with the same vigour demonstrated by God in this passage.*
-

Final Prayer

You ask us to be still, Lord Jesus Christ. Still so that we might rest, still so that we might listen, still to be at peace with ourselves, and still to hear Your voice speaking. Thank You Lord Jesus Christ, for the gift of this stillness, and may it enrich all our work and activity, for You: AMEN
