

Prayer

Dear Lord and Father, Your love has no end. You continue to show us love even when we have completely lost our way, and You draw us back to Yourself with the firmness and care of the truest of friends. May we always know that whatever we feel, whatever we do, and whatever we say, Your love is never exhausted, because You are God Almighty: AMEN

Prayer Suggestions

Prayer ideas

Say your prayers as usual, and then wait on the Lord in complete silence. Allow Him to show you His will

On-going prayers

- **Pray about the use of the Bible.** *Pray for those who seek to send the Bible throughout the world, giving it to those who need it most*
- *Pray for the money markets of your country; pray for integrity in trading*
- *Give thanks for love, for the people who love you and all that this means to you*

Meditation

We believe in God, who is Love,
Whose Word sustains the universe and all life within it.

We believe in Jesus, God's Son,
Whose life shows the meaning of love and brings peace.

We believe in the Holy Spirit,
Who is God, alive and active like wind and fire within us.

We believe in the Church of God,
Which is all God's people, the 'body' of Christ our Lord.

We believe in the resurrection,
Which is new life with Jesus, both now and in the future.

We believe in the return of Jesus,
Which is the end of our world, when God remakes it anew!

We believe in a God of Love.
Who seeks nothing more from us than the return of His love.

Bible passage – Exodus 23:10-19

¹⁰ You will sow your land and gather its produce for six years, ¹¹ but on the seventh you will stop working it and let it lie fallow, then the poor of your people will be able to eat, and whatever they leave the wildlife in the field may eat. You will do the same with your vineyard and your olive groves.

¹² You will do your work for six days and you will rest on the seventh day, so that your ox and donkey may rest and the child of your maidservant and the resident stranger may be revived.

¹³ Be careful to do everything I have told you, and do not cite the names of other gods; never let them be heard on your lips.

¹⁴ You will hold a feast to me three times a year. ¹⁵ You will hold the feast of Unleavened Bread: You will 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.

You will not appear before me empty-handed.

¹⁶ You will hold the feast of Harvest, the first-fruits of your work of sowing in the open field. You will hold the feast of Ingathering at the close of the year, when you gather together the fruit of your work in the field.

¹⁷ All your men are to appear before the Lord God three times a year.

¹⁸ You will not offer the blood of my sacrifices with anything leavened, and the fat from my festivals must not be left overnight until the morning.

¹⁹ You will bring the best of the first-fruits of your land to the house of the LORD your God.

You will not cook a kid in its mother's milk.

Bible Study

Review

In this passage we discover that God intends worship and everyday life to be intertwined. In a world in which Christians find it hard to connect everyday life with church life on Sundays, this advice has much to offer. The ten regulations here concern both agriculture (23:10-13) and festival worship (23:14-17), though the last three (23:18-19) are difficult for us to understand today. Nevertheless, it is not too hard to work out what these laws may have meant to the people to whom they were first given. Neither is it too hard to work out how their principles might help us understand God's advice for life and worship today.

Firstly, we should state the obvious, for these regulations are about agricultural life and they were given to Israel whilst they were in the desert! As such, they were given in anticipation of the coming occupation of the Promised Land, and had to be carried through forty years of desert wandering as an act of faith. The fact that Israel did this is evidence of a job well done!

To begin with, these regulations (23:10-13) describe a system of crop rotation based on Sabbath regulations, which ensured the maintenance of holiness and godliness amongst God's people in the Promised Land. Now, leaving the ground fallow for one year in seven was somewhat risky, for where would food come from in the following year? To do this would be an act of faith similar to that required when refraining from collecting manna on the Sabbath (16:14f.), but it required God's people to trust Him for His provision not just for one day, but for a whole year! The main beneficiaries of this regulation were the poor, who could glean food from the fallow ground, but the other beneficiaries would be the land and wildlife. As we might say today, God's people were to honour the environment!

The next set of regulations (23:14-16) defines three agricultural festivals of worship. It was natural that people should worship God in this way, because successful crops meant food and food meant life, and God was the giver of life. However, it is not obvious to us today what these regulations mean. In fact, the feast of 'Unleavened Bread' combines the first harvest of the year (barley) with the remembrance of the Exodus (23:15). The second feast of 'Harvest' and the offering of 'first fruits' celebrates the later grain harvest (mainly wheat) which was later associated with entry into the Promised Land. The third feast celebrates the final harvest of the 'in-gathering' of grape and olive crops, which was associated with the giving of the Law on Mount Sinai. All together, these regulations outlined a strong social and religious structure for the life of God's people, and this was focussed on the worship of God.

There are some other important regulations to be found here, such as the instruction not to name other gods (23:13) and not to appear empty handed before God (23:15). These reflect the overall theme of the passage, which is to honour God in the whole of life. Then at the end, we find some other regulations that are a little more difficult to understand (23:18,19). These are a ban on mixing blood (representing life) and leaven (representing evil) with the fat of an offering that was supposed to be offered to God (see Leviticus 1 to 3). We also read the important rule that demands that only the best is offered to God in worship (23:19), along with a regulation about not cooking a kid in its mother's milk! We will explore these further later on, but this last rule clearly forbids some ancient practice that was abhorrent to God (23:19).

It is hard to take in all the details of the anticipated life and worship of Israel in this whistle-stop tour of Exodus 23. However, the underlying principle is worthy of our fullest attention; God gave His people a routine that was respectful of life, of the environment and God Himself. We still have much to learn from this.

Going Deeper

The Bible study goes deeper to look at these issues:

- What more can we learn from Israel's agricultural system (23:10-13)?

- What did it mean to hold three harvest festivals a year (23:14-17)?
- What do the strange laws at the end of this passage really mean (23:18,19)?

Notes on the text and translation

- V11** ***'you will stop working it and let it lie fallow'** The Hebrew has literally 'let it drop and leave it alone', and we must assume that this was the Israelites' way of talking about letting land lie fallow.*
- V11** ***'the wildlife in the field may eat'** This is only a small point, but most versions have 'the wild beasts may eat'; however, the Hebrew has a well used word for 'wild beasts' and it is not used here. It says more literally 'what is living in the field may eat', and this seems to be a reference to wildlife in general. I have translated the passage to reflect this.*
- V12** ***'the child of your maidservant and the resident stranger may be revived.'** The last word in this sentence is a word based on the Hebrew for 'life', implying that the poor mentioned in the sentence may receive life through eating the natural product of the fallow field.*
- V13** ***'do not cite the names of other gods.'** You will not expect to see the word 'cite' in the Old Testament, but I have used it because the Hebrew word means 'causing something to be brought to mind or remembered', and although it is not used in any other translation, the word 'cite' seems to me to be the best way of expressing this in English.*
- V14** ***'you will hold the feast ...'** There is one Hebrew word for 'holding a feast', and it is the famous word 'hag', and I have used the expression 'hold a feast' rather than the more elaborate 'celebrate a feast'. This is because it is easy for us to focus on the word 'celebrate' (because it is parallel to our notions of 'worship'), but in reality we ought to be looking at what is meant by the concept of 'hag' in the Bible.*
- V17** ***'the Lord God'** This is a relatively rare but highly formal way of referring to God, putting together the Hebrew word 'Lord' with the Holy name for God, 'JHWH' (which itself was usually pronounced as 'Lord').*

Going Deeper

What more can we learn from Israel's agricultural system (23:10-13)?

If you think about the practicality of operating the system described in verse 10, then it would surely leave a significant problem. If everyone left their fields fallow in one specified year, then that would surely be like an enforced famine in a land prone to famine! In addition, the 'poor of your people' (23:11) would only be able to glean for food in the fallow fields one year in seven!

It is generally reckoned that the regulation was never kept in this way, however, and although the weekly Sabbath was kept on the same day by everyone, and the jubilee year (one day in fifty – see Leviticus 25:10f. and 27:17f.) was kept (rarely) on one year, the agricultural 'Sabbath' was different. There is a little evidence that farmers would cycle their plots of land through the cycle so that each plot had its fallow year, but most were in operation most of the time. There was no requirement in the written law of the Old Testament to do otherwise, and this made sense both for the provision of food, and also for the needs of the poor expressed in this passage. Doing this may be said to have reduced the sense of faith in God and dependency on Him for life, but it could also be argued that if a farmer arranged his fields so that he had seven, and one was always fallow, then he had a constant reminder of God's provision before him all the time!

The whole of this passage has overlapping themes, and verse 12 confirms the connection with the Sabbath, by reaffirming the importance of refraining from work on one day in seven. Here, however, the principle of rest is clearly stated (23:12). Surprisingly, in Exodus 20, people are commanded to refrain from work because God rested, and in Genesis 2:1-3, Scripture simply states that God rested on the seventh day. However, whilst we can all infer that we should do what God does, this is the first text that specifically instructs God's people to rest on the Sabbath, identifying the benefit for the poor, both animal and human, who work hard and need to be 'revived'.

It is a little surprising that immediately after this, the command is given 'do not cite the name of other gods; never let them be heard on your lips' (23:13). This may appear to us to be mixing up the various rules and regulations somewhat. However, we should understand that in most ancient societies the daily routines of work were strongly influenced by the nation's gods and religious practices. So bearing this in mind, the instruction is like a demand by God that the people do not think of any other god whilst they work. This was an important command that the people failed to keep in later years. There is strong Biblical evidence (Hosea 2) that in later years the people of Israel worshipped the 'Ba'als' gods who were fertility gods for the purpose of ensuring the fertility of their crops. This is exactly what this command was intended to prevent.

What did it mean to hold three harvest festivals a year (23:14-17)?

The instructions about the three festivals are all important, but they are described by one Hebrew word, 'hag'. This word means a festive event drawing all God's people together in one place, requiring pilgrimage. However, if we want to understand what a 'hag' is, we should add to this word not the details of the festivals, but the three small commands that occur in the midst of them. These are firstly, 'you will hold a 'hag' for me three times a year' (23:14), then 'you will not appear before me empty handed' (23:15), and lastly 'all your men are to appear before the Lord God three times a year' (23:17). Each festive event was therefore a serious event, involving considerable effort and planning.

The three festive events each have their history (as we indicated above), and by the time of Christ, they had changed considerably. It was considered sufficient for the devout to come to Jerusalem once a year, and perhaps once in a lifetime for those living outside Judah and Galilee. The temple trade that so angered Jesus (Matt 21:12f.) was a means of servicing people's need to bring gifts to God in the Temple so they did not come 'empty handed' (23:15). Yet impressively and despite their failings, the Jewish people celebrated God in almost every feature of their lives, from family life where the Passover was held, to the national life of later years when festivals were held in Jerusalem.

When all these elements are put together, we have a serious picture of what Israel's festive occasions were intended to be! Everyone had to do it when God said, three times a year and each time for a whole week, and everyone had to come with a gift! We cannot but conclude that the Islamic 'Haj' at Mecca held to this day is far closer to this picture of a festive event than anything held by Christian churches! The difference for Christians between the Old Testament and today is Christ Himself, however, and He told us to learn from what God has said, but act according to the New Covenant of grace, rather than regulation. For this reason, we do not still hold the three festivals, except that Passover has become Easter, for this was the festival at which Christ died, and 'Harvest' has become our 'Pentecost', because the Holy Spirit came upon the disciples at this festival (see Acts 2). There is no specific equivalent to the third Old Testament harvest of 'In-gathering', later called 'Tabernacles', except that some suggest it is equivalent to our 'harvest festival'.

What is important however is the principle that lies behind this, which is that what we do on a regular basis should reflect our faith in God, whether it is our personal life at work and home, or our church community life and its various celebrations. We would do well to take seriously the commands and regulations that take the Sabbath principle seriously, by honouring God through rest, meeting together regularly, and not failing to bring our offerings to Him.

What do the strange laws at the end of this passage really mean (23:18,19)?

We are left with four strange laws at the end of this passage (23:18,19), out of which we only normally understand the third, about bringing our best to the Lord (23:19). The first two are about blood and fat, and we tend to ignore them because they are to do with sacrifices. The one about cooking a kid in its mother's milk remains a mystery to most.

The first command forbids the mixing of blood and leaven. One explanation is that given in the introduction to this Bible study, but that is not all. The idea of offering blood and leavened bread together is rather strange, given that all other regulations about sacrifice kept animal sacrifice and grain offering separate; so what could this command in verse 18 possibly mean? It was the practice of some ancient religions for people to drink the blood of animals as this was thought to impart life. God forbade this (Lev 17:10f. Deut 12:23), and all blood had to be poured out to the Lord at the altar. However, there is some evidence that one way of consuming blood was for it to be mixed with bread and eaten or offered to a god on an altar. The regulation in verse 18 forbids such a practice.

The command to not leave 'fat' overnight when making offerings to the Lord can be explained simply. In later regulations, we read that 'all fat belongs to the Lord' (Lev 3:3f.), and as such, all the fat from offerings was to be burned on the altar soon after the animal was slaughtered. To omit this immediately was a major error in the conduct of a sacrifice and a matter of disobedience against God, something that later generations of priests and kings would discover to their cost (see 1 Sam 2:12f. and 1 Sam 15).

The third command to bring one's best to God is interesting, for when the offering brought was a sheep or other animal, it was easy for the priest to assess whether the offering was suitable and 'unblemished'. However, how was the priest to know whether an offering of grain was what the Lord required? At the agricultural festivals, was the offering really the first of the crop, was it really the best? The one bringing the offering could easily have left the best at home! So the potential for abuse meant that the regulation was necessary, and is repeated in Exodus (34:26).

The last regulation in this passage bans the cooking of a young kid in its mother's milk; but under what circumstances might such a thing be done? Just as in the matter of the blood and leavened bread above, there is some evidence that a mother's milk was considered to be a carrier of life. Consequently, the boiling or cooking of a young goat was a sacrificial act in which a life offered to God was prepared for a 'fellowship

offering' (see Lev 3f.), so to use the mother's milk (representing life) for the cooking was an abhorrence! On the one hand, the act was probably a ban on a foreign practice; on the other hand, it is possible that the principle here can be roughly stated like this; 'you shall not use to destroy something that has been given for life'.

Application

The whole collection of laws is an impressive array of laws that tie the worship of God to all aspects of everyday life, from the fields to the regular celebratory events of God's people. There are a number of points of interest for God's people today, although we should always keep in mind the caution that these laws were for a people who were never able to receive the full forgiveness of Christ and therefore receive complete salvation. The laws given them reflect God's principles, but the details often reflect the circumstances in which they lived, rather than those in which we worship today.

It is nevertheless fascinating to read that it means something to the Lord to see all His people together, as in the Old Testament 'hag'. The idea that all Christians might meet together for worship in one place is impossibly and unworkably huge, but it does challenge us about the willingness of Christians to be seen as united in Christ. When Christians today read these Old Testament rules about festive worship, they tend to take from this ideas about celebration, or harvest, and respond by linking events in people's lives or in society generally to worship events in the life of the church. There is nothing wrong with this, but often, what is lacking is the sense of duty and obligation amongst Christians to be seen to honour God in public, and perhaps the idea of giving time to God in pilgrimage together with other Christians.

Other regulations from which we can learn are those that require us not to come before the Lord 'empty handed', and to bring the best we have to the Lord. We should always remember that God understands the relative nature of what He is asking here, for what is 'best' for one person may be quite different for another. Lastly, I suggest that the principle of not using for destruction what God has given for life is worth exploring, but I leave that to you!

Discipleship

Questions *(for use in groups)*

1. Discuss which of these laws has direct relevance for today.
2. In general, how can we determine which laws of the Old Testament are ones we should use today, and which can we leave to one side?
3. What is the value of harvest festival services today, and does this passage give a suitable justification for how they are held today?

Personal comments by author

I was once challenge to preach upon the text of Exodus 23:19; 'you will not cook a kid in its mother's milk'! This is why I have simplified this peculiar regulation down to a spiritual principle (as above) concerning life and death. For when this text is explored, it keys into a number of significant New Testament themes, notably using the gifts of God for what they were intended. It is not appropriate to leave to one side any of God's laws or regulations, because we do not always know what they signify!

Ideas for exploring discipleship

- *Some of these laws may affect you personally. Read through the passage and work out which of them say something to you directly. Let the Lord guide you to any that suggest some aspect of worship to which you should give attention.*
- *Pray for God's people throughout the world, and pray that God will bring His people together in understanding and unity; even though we do not know how that can happen.*

Final Prayer

Lord Jesus, please help all who find it hard to deal with their problems, and do not know where to turn. May we be sensitive to the plight of others, and ready to be used by You to help. May we also be willing to

receive help from others when we have needs, so that we are seen to 'practice what we preach'. Thank You Lord Jesus, AMEN.
