

Prayer

Almighty God; You are our Creator and our Redeemer, and Your care for us extends far beyond our understanding or our reach. Give us the humility to accept that ultimately, we do not know all things, and although we may explore our world and develop it, we can never compete with Your supreme creative and saving power. May we honour You as the One from whom everything comes, and live as if we truly believe it. AMEN

Prayer Suggestions

Prayer ideas

Give thanks to God for those who love you, and for all the good things that have happened to you in recent times

On-going prayers

- **Pray about the use of the Bible.** *Pray for those who are still attempting to translate the Bible into all the world's languages*
- *Give thanks to God for the visual arts, including painting and sculpture*
- *Pray for the money markets of your country; pray for integrity in trading*

Meditation

May we, Lord Jesus, be true to our calling:

May we offer our honest worship;

The offering of our hearts in spirit and truth,
The service of our lives and everything we do,
And the giving of our best to You.

May we be a living fellowship;

A community founded in love and service,
A gathering of people in faith and peace
And the gifts of Your Spirit, shared.

May we be people who bless the world;

By practical and effective expressions of love,
By ceaseless effort for the benefit of others
And striving for the best, through You.

Bible passage – Exodus 23:20-33

²⁰ Look, I am sending an angel in front of you, to guard you on the way and to bring you to the place that I have prepared. ²¹ Be careful in his presence and obey his voice; do not resent him, for he will not ignore your rebellion since my name is within him. ²² But if you do indeed obey his voice and do everything I say, then I will be an enemy to your enemies and be hostile to those who are hostile to you.

²³ When my angel goes ahead of you, and brings you to the Amorites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Canaanites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites, and I will set about destroying them, ²⁴ you must not bow down to their gods, you must not serve them, you must not do as they do, but you must overthrow them completely and break their pillars into pieces.

²⁵ You must serve the Lord your God, and he will bless your bread and your water; then I will remove sickness from your midst. ²⁶ No one will suffer the loss of a child or be barren in your land; I will complete the number of your days.

²⁷ I will send my terror before you, and will throw into confusion all the people you come up against, and make all your enemies turn their backs to you. ²⁸ And I will send panic ahead of you, which will drive out the Hivites, the Canaanites, and the Hittites from in front of you. ²⁹ I

will not thrust them out before you in one year, lest the land become wasteland and the wildlife become too much for you. ³⁰ I will drive them out from before you little by little, until you have increased enough to take the land.

³¹ I will set your borders from the Red Sea to the sea of the Philistines, and from the wilderness to the Euphrates, for I will give the inhabitants of the land to you, and you will drive them out before you. ³² You will make no covenant with them or their gods. ³³ They must not live in your land, or they will make you turn away from me; for if you worship their gods, this will become a death-trap for you.

Bible Study

Review

This extraordinary passage of scripture is something of a surprise. In recent chapters Exodus has set out rules for the regulation and governance of Israel as an agricultural nation based on the Ten Commandments. These help Israel apply the Commandments through a system of justice, and identify punishments for when they are broken. In this passage, however, it is obvious that this part of God's legal code has come to an end.

Here, God speaks to reassure His people with a promise that He will lead them through the desert to take possession of their Promised Land. If they remain obedient, they will find that the journey is not a struggle but a blessing, and God will fight for them against their enemies (23:22). God calls for absolute and complete obedience on the part of Israel, and if they are to get to their destination, they must follow the guidance of His 'angel' (23:20f.). The passage also contains some preliminary instructions about what the people should do when they take the Promised Land from the people and gods already there (23:23,24,32).

This passage contains a sequence of interesting points about God's guidance of Israel after the giving of the law, but if we do not pause to think about what is happening here then we will miss something important. What we have read is a formal ending to the law given first at Sinai, and in the next chapter of Exodus it is called the 'Book of the Covenant' (see Ex 24:7). Because of this, we must read this passage as part of God's covenant promise to His people. God first made a covenant promise to bless His people and give them a land when He spoke to Abraham (Gen 12:2,3, 13:15), and the list of nations found in this passage is virtually the same as those given previously (see Gen 15:20, 23:23 and Ex 3:8f.). This proves that we are on the right track to read this passage as a covenant document. Most notably, a covenant agreement required accountability, and Israel's responsibility in this covenant was to be obedient to God (23:22,24). If the people were obedient, then they would be able to reap the reward of His blessings (23:25,26).

Possession of land is always contentious. Notice however that at this early stage, God says that He will drive out the nations in Canaan Himself (23:23), and says He will do this 'little by little', to protect Israel and keep His side of the covenant bargain (23:27-30). This presents us with a challenge because we know that this is not what happened, and Israel had to wage war for many years, albeit with the help of God, to gain entry into Canaan (see the book of Joshua). Now, the reason for the change of plan was Israel's disobedience in the desert when they refused to follow God's guidance (see the book of Numbers, chapter 13), and we will study this difficult and troublesome part of Israel's history later.

Still, God kept His side of the covenant by offering the Promised Land to His people, and it was not the only blessing He gave. Verses 25 and 26 describe God's four blessings of life; food and water, health, fertility and long life (23:25), and these are given as a reward for Israel's obedience. Israel was called to honour God in every aspect of life, so the nation's agricultural lifestyle was to be intermingled with worship (23:10-19).

The balance of promise, caution and blessing is typical of the way God dealt with His people throughout the Old Testament (see also Deuteronomy). The whole Bible is witness to the fact that this covenant promised much, but ultimately, the people of Israel failed to be obedient and uphold the covenant. We read the story of Jesus against this background, for He has fulfilled the Old Testament law and points us towards God's grace. So, God's blessings of a secure life are ultimately found not through obedience to a moral code, but by God's grace alone, and whilst they may be enjoyed partially in this life, they point us towards the blessing of 'eternal life' in Christ.

Going Deeper

The Bible study goes deeper to look at these issues:

- Why does God reveal this covenant using an angel?

- What does God promise to His people?
- What does God require of His people?
- What is added to our understanding of this passage by verses 27 to 33.

Notes on the text and translation

- V21** ***'Be careful in his presence and obey his voice; do not resent him, for he will not ignore your rebellions since my name is within him.'*** The translation of this verse is not straightforward. Each phrase is full of ancient ways of speaking that need interpreting. The Hebrew reads something like this, 'watch in his face and pay attention to his voice; do not be bitter to him for he will not lift from your rebellions, for my name is placed in him.' Altogether, this is an urgent message to accept this messenger from God, and this translation interprets the verse as a message of authority that must be treated with caution.
- V23** ***'I will set about destroying them'*** The Hebrew verb for 'I will destroy' is in a special form that means 'causing' the action to take place. The word therefore indicates strongly that God will do the destroying, so I have attempted to convey this emphasis here.
- V26** ***'no one will suffer the loss of a child'***. Nearly all Bible versions have 'no one will miscarry'. However, the basic Hebrew word is about suffering bereavement, and the form of the verb suggests being made childless. Most put the two together to make 'miscarry', but this could well refer to a wide variety of instances of loss including death in childbirth and loss of a child soon after birth; hence my translation.
- V28** ***'I will send panic ahead of you'*** The Hebrew word here is 'hornet', in the singular. There is little evidence for the meaning of the word, except that the hornet sting is a sign of fear. If the Lord was sending out a 'pestilence' (as most translations suggest) then other Hebrew words would suffice for this, and the singular 'hornet strongly suggests a colloquialism. 'Panic' is my guess at this, but I believe it to be a reasonable guess.
- V33** ***'...death-trap'*** In most Bible versions, the word 'snare' is used, which is quite correct. However, we forget today that the purpose of a snare was to kill an animal (whereas we think of snaring animals to keep them alive). It is better therefore to translate 'death-trap, so that we understand the gravity of the symbol used here.

Going Deeper

Why does God reveal this covenant using an angel?

Angels appear at various critical points in the Old Testament story, so it is highly significant that an angel appears here. In Exodus, it was an angel who called to Moses from the burning bush (3:2), and an angel who protected the people of Israel whilst they were crossing the Red Sea (14:19). In each case, the angel seems to disappear and be replaced by some manifestation of God's presence, the voice from the burning bush or the cloud leading Israel through the desert, as in these two examples. Undoubtedly, the presence of the angel indicates a highly important point in the book of Exodus, and there is only one other reference to an angel, which is at the height of the controversy between Moses and the rest of Israel after the incident of the 'golden calf' (32:34, 33:2). For this reason alone, we should emphasise the point most strongly that the Ten Commandments plus the legal codes in chapters 21 to 23 are of fundamental importance to both Israel and the whole Old Testament, as the 'Book of the Covenant'.

When you read verse 21, it is tempting to believe, as some people have done in the past, that the angel was in fact Moses, or possibly Aaron, in their capacity of speaking to the people on God's behalf. However, neither Moses nor Aaron, from what we read of them in Exodus, are ever described as speaking directly with God's voice, as the angel is here. The passage says 'my name is within him' (23:21), meaning that the angel acts directly for God and is His messenger. We do not know exactly how the angel was made manifest to (made known to, or seen by) the people, but the passage indicates that they had to be ready to receive God's Word and His instruction at any time or place. They had to be able to recognise this and act on it, for this would enable the Lord God to be with His people.

For Christians who know the presence of God through the person of Jesus and the work of the Holy Spirit, the talk of angels sometimes seems rather 'old-fashioned'. However, these stories in the Bible help us to understand that the spiritual world is not far from the material world we inhabit, and we must always be ready for God to break through and reveal Himself, perhaps as an 'angel'. Our readiness to accept God's revelation in this and in any other way enables us to be in contact with our God and so be obedient to His

call, and enables God to act with us and on our behalf (23:22). Resenting God's guidance is not an option (23:21)!

What does God promise to His people?

Firstly, God promises to bring His people to their 'Promised Land' (23:20). This promise has not been mentioned much recently in Exodus, but the people did not simply come out of Egypt to worship their God at Sinai (as Moses repeatedly told Pharaoh (Ex 9:1, 10:3,7,8,11,24 etc.))! God brought the people out to Sinai to move them on to complete a promise He made to their forefathers (as above). The journey to the Promised Land was to receive God's complete attention, and He would guard the people on the way and bring them 'to the place that I have prepared' (23:20). The fact that this is the Lord's work is stressed in verse 23; 'I will set about destroying them' (see notes above).

If you read the book of Judges, you will read about how Israel invaded Canaan and sometimes did what God wanted and allowed Him to control their work (as in the capture of Jericho – Josh. 6), and sometimes they did what they pleased (see the battle for Ai – Josh. 7). The overall campaign is successful, but at a cost. Weaknesses and divisions were created between the tribes during the conquest, and the period of settlement in Canaan under a sequence of 'judges' eventually became an unmitigated disaster (see Judges 17-21). It was only after the ministry of the remarkable Samuel and the heroic David that Israel was reunited, years after the invasion of the land (2 Sam 7f.). Nevertheless, this remarkable history that affects us even to this day, was set in motion by God's promise to bring His people to Canaan, and to ensure that this would happen Himself.

The specific promises added in verses 25 and 26 are the Lord's personal blessings, given to the people to enable them to have a full and meaningful life as a reward for obedience. In this early stage of the relationship between God and His people, they needed to know that God alone provided for their needs, and the four blessings reflect these. In ancient times, famine, sickness, the high loss of young children and limited life span, were all significant restrictions on both the quality and quantity of life. We could say that many of these issues have been dealt with now by science and medicine, however, few would disagree that each issue remains significant. Indeed, inequalities throughout the world in food and water, medical treatment, the survival of pregnant women and children, and longevity, are a scandal given the potential we have to solve these things (by God's grace). The language of this passage may be ancient, but each issue is relevant to us now and also to the Kingdom of God.

What does God require of His people?

We have already seen that God's people are required to listen for His voice (the angel in verse 20, 21), and within this part of our passage there is an element of threat. The people must be ready to watch for God's presence and His voice, but the angel 'will not ignore your rebellion'. Obedience is required of God's people because the alternative is to stand in rebellion against His will. Now, although God's people today have the benefit of the grace of God in Jesus Christ, I suggest that disobedience and rebellion is still a problem. Rebellion is described in both the Old and the New Testaments as the most basic of sins against God, for rebellion is placing one's own opinions and self above that of God, and 'doing your own thing'. As well as this passage, scriptures from Genesis to Paul's letters urge us to be vigilant against this sin because it breaks our relationship with God.

Secondly, God requires His people to trust Him. When He says that he will 'set about destroying' the nations already in Canaan, the Lord knew very well that He would be asking the Israelites to do battle and fight for their 'Promised Land', but they would have to do it His way, and trust Him. The first chapters of Joshua illustrate this, and they remain painful reminders to God's people to this day that there is no substitute to trusting Him.

Following this, however, God's covenant requirement was that the people do not 'bow down to their gods', or 'serve them', or 'do as they do', and the Lord gives instructions about the total destruction of foreign gods. Indeed, a careful read of the text here says that God will deal with the foreign nations, but Israel must concentrate on battling against the gods! Only the total obliteration of their altars and pillars, and other visual reminders of pagan worship, will do (23:24). It is made clear that fighting against the spiritual influence of other religions and other gods is essential.

The final requirement is mentioned at the beginning of verse 25, and it is to 'serve', or 'worship', the Lord. The consequence of regular, sustained and life embracing worship is that no other gods can gain a place in the life of God's people.

What is added to our understanding of this passage by verses 27 to 33.

The remainder of the passage that we have not focussed on today, verses 27 to 33, cover roughly the same ground. Some would say that the whole of this passage, verse 20 to 33 is arranged 'chiastically'; a way of arranging a story in an ordered way, so that the second half is like a mirror image of the first. It is not a

literary structure we use today, but it is found throughout the Bible, and if you have read these notes regularly, you will be familiar with the word and what it means (see dictionary). If the passage is chiasmic (and I have some reservations), then the centre of the passage is God's blessings in verses 25 and 26, and the remainder of the text goes back over what we have already read, the taking of the Promised Land (verses 27 to 30 – see also verses 23 to 24). Lastly, the passage gives God's essential covenant instructions (verses 31 to 33 – see verses 20 to 22).

We are given details about how God will achieve His victory over the different nations of Canaan (23:27-30), including the reputation and 'fear' of God that would go before the people (23:27,28). This is fulfilled in part by the story of Rahab in Jericho (see Joshua 2:1f.), but the interesting part of this passage is God's decision to do the work slowly so that Israel will have time to take the land in a managed way. The idea that wildlife might present a problem seems a bit far-fetched, but history is littered with stories of human expansion checked by natural problems, whether environmental or due to problems with animals. For example, it is reported that after the Second World War, the absence of effort during the hostilities of war to check the tiger population in Malaysia by hunting meant that there was a considerable problem with rampaging tigers!

The last part of the text identifies the borders of Israel that were only truly achieved in the reigns of David and Solomon, many centuries later, and it reiterates the ban on the worship of other gods. This ban is a recurring theme not only in this passage, but also in the whole of Exodus 21 to 23. If the many laws in these chapters cover most of the Ten Commandments, then this passage certainly emphasises the importance of the first.

Application

This passage of scripture urges God's people to be obedient to Him. Now that we have a Saviour in Jesus, we can go to Him whenever we have problems to seek forgiveness for our sins, including disobedience. However, it is still worth asking whether we show sufficient obedience to God, and to His revealed will. I have felt in recent years that in the rush to find new forms of 'being church', for example, people have too easily followed thoughts and plans that come from their own perception rather than God's. For me the test of obedience in such matters is the unity of God's people and the 'body of Christ'; does whatever is proposed build up the whole body of Christ? If we are being obedient to the Lord, then I do believe that He has big plans for His people, just as in this passage of Scripture. So when people really know the mind of God they are often completely awestruck by the scale of what is proposed. God's concern today is for the whole world, and what He requires of us locally is to fit in with a global movement of His Spirit that is bigger than anything He may do through us individually. It was probably beyond the understanding of God's people at Sinai that they would inherit their own land from the Lord, but they had to take each step by trusting in Him.

One of the main features of this passage is the importance of keeping pure in the worship of God. This is also a message that we must take to heart. Without a doubt, we are called today to take the risks of identifying ourselves as God's people in a world that is becoming increasingly hostile to Christian faith. We have no option but to take this challenge head on, remembering that as we do so, we stand in the line of countless others who through history have trusted in the Lord in difficult times, and contributed to our great heritage of Faith. This passage reminds us of the first 'people of God' who were called upon to trust God and be obedient, and their story can be our inspiration.

Discipleship

Questions (for use in groups)

1. Discuss in your group the taking of the Promised Land, and ask what justification can be given to the warfare by which it was achieved?
2. How do we gain the blessings of God today, and how do they compare with what is written here?
3. To what extent are Christians called to be obedient, and what is the difference between this and faith?

Personal comments by author

There are a number of important issues to be considered when trying to work out what we think of the wars conducted by God in the Old Testament. I spent some time looking at this issue a number of years ago, and wrote a paper 'the angry God of the Old Testament?' It helped me to come to terms with many of the issues that people find difficult about the Old Testament, and I will search this out and place it on the 'resources' page of the website for those who are interested.

Ideas for exploring discipleship

- *What does being obedient to God mean to you? Do you find it easier to criticise others for being disobedient, or discover how you have been disobedient? Pray about the matter of obedience, and ask the Lord for help if you find it hard to know how to deal with this issue.*
 - *Read through a newspaper and make judgements on which stories illustrate disobedience to God. Use this as a basis for prayer in the coming days.*
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Final Prayer

Holy Spirit, lead me onwards to share with everyone I meet the great blessings I have received through Jesus Christ. Holy Spirit, take my life and purify it by Your fire, so that I might be found acceptable before God's throne of grace. Holy Spirit, strengthen my faith and give me hope; in the name of Jesus; AMEN
