

## DHW

### LESSON 20

#### *THE BOOK OF EXODUS*

#### *Chapters 22 & 23A*

#### *INTRODUCTION*

*Now these are the judgments, which thou shalt set before them,* God told Moses. In the previous chapter, God had listed a series of judgments that relate to various areas of human relationship. Now in these two chapters, the list continues. More judgments are given. These judgments concern fairness and justice in acts like the loss of livestock or other property through carelessness of people, thefts, breach of trust or anything borrowed, seduction, sorcery, sexual offences, and sacrificing to false gods. Some judgments concern a compassion for the poor and fatherless, the oppressed, and the foreigners. This list ends with the injunction to the people to consecrate themselves and their

resources three times in a year through observing the three major feasts of the LORD.

Although these judgments were given to Israel in the Old Testament, they are nevertheless very valuable and precious to us in the New Testament. They are the judgments of God and not man. As such the principles underlying these judgments are pure, perfect, and profitable. These two chapters (22:1-23:19) are outlined in detail according to the description given by the divine author. The main focus of the commentary will be on each section rather than dealing with each judgment as it is presented.

The following is an outline of chapters 22 & 23:

- 1) The laws regarding thefts and restitution (22:1-15);
- 2) The laws regarding sexual and religious immorality (22:16-20);
- 3) The laws regarding strangers and widows (22:21-24);
- 4) The laws regarding civil obligations (22:21-23:9);

- 5) The laws regarding the Sabbath, sacred feasts and the Promised Land (23:10-19).

### *STUDY THE WORD*

#### **Laws Regarding Thefts & Restitution**

Continuing with the series of judgments in human relationships, this section (22:1-6) focuses on judgments concerning honesty and responsibility in the treatment of personal property. A thief when he is caught must make full restitution for the stolen goods. The fine is quite heavy. In the case of a person who entrusts his money or valuables to his neighbour, and the money or valuables are stolen, if the thief is caught, the thief must compensate twice the value of the stolen goods (22:7). But if the thief is not caught, then the two concerned parties will go before the judges, who will decide on the guilt of the trustee. The decision of the judges is final (22:7-9). However, if the thing entrusted is an animal, and should the animal

*die, or be hurt, or driven away, no man seeing it* (22:10), the trustee and the owner will take an oath before God, the trustee declaring that he has not cheated his neighbour, he is free from the liability (22:11). The taking of an oath before God is a serious matter. If one swears before God and lies, the wrath of God will be upon the liar.

In the case of house burglary, the host of the house is not guilty of bloodshed if the burglar is harmed and killed when breaking into the house at night (22:2-3). But if the burglar is harmed and killed when he breaks in broad daylight the host of the house is guilty of homicide. The reason for this rule is that since the thief breaks into the house in broad daylight, it is assumed that he has no intention to harm the host, other than to steal. The owner of the house has no right to kill the burglar but he may protect his property by any other means. It does not mean the burglar can help

himself to any belongings of the host and walk away freely. The burglary in the night is understandable, because in the dark the host cannot be sure, whether the thief is carrying a deadly weapon. So he has the right to defend himself from possible danger of death. It is interesting to note that theft is not punishable by imprisonment. Moreover, even the life of the thief is protected from unnecessary action.

Carelessness on the part of anyone that causes the loss or damage of another person's property may not be excused. If a person's animals stray to another man's field and eat of the grass of the field, the owner of the animal must compensate the other party. This also applies to a person, who kindles a fire, and his neighbour's corn field catches fire through negligence on the part of him who kindles the fire, he must make restitution (22:5, 6).

If a man who entrusts his animals for safe-keeping to his

neighbour, and if the animal is stolen from him through his carelessness, then the trustee must make full restitution (22:12). But if the animal is torn into pieces, the trustee must bring in witnesses to prove his innocence, and so he is not liable to compensate (22:13).

In the case of a person who borrows something from his neighbour, and the thing is damaged, hurt, or dead, the owner must make good (22:14). But if the owner is present when the damage happens, the borrower is not liable (22:15).

### **Laws on Sexual & Religious Immorality**

The next series of judgments (22:16-23:19) covers matters relating to seduction, capital offences, widows and the fatherless, obligations to God, treatment of others, and ceremonial laws of the Sabbath and sacred feasts.

**Seduction** of a young lady is a serious crime. If a man entices a maid and has sexual relations with

her, he must marry her. If her father objects and refuses the marriage, the man must *pay money according to the dowry of virgins* – (22:17; Hebrew, *mohar*, the purchase price of wife). Although the price for a bride is not given here, in a parallel passage in Deuteronomy 22:29 it is set at *fifty shekels of silver*.

*Three capital offences* are next listed (22:18-20). A *witch* was not to be tolerated or allowed to exist. The word *witch* is from the Hebrew *kashaph* meaning one who practises witchcraft or sorcery. So, the word *witch* can be translated as “sorcerer.” The sorcerer is known as one, who claims to have supernatural knowledge or power which is used to influence the gods or to cast magic spells. The fact that it is designated to women is because they were more susceptible to this kind of practices.

Included in this category of capital offences is the act of having sex with an animal. This animal-

like immoral act is unnatural and most degrading. It is punishable by death. The people of Israel were prohibited from such immoral practice which seems to be common among the Canaanites at that time.

Making sacrifices to false gods was an offence of the gravest kind. It is an open rebellion against the LORD God and is punished by death. It is tantamount to spiritual adultery. It is abhorrent to the LORD God of Israel. This intimates that any form of idolatry or worship of false gods is strictly forbidden and it carries the death penalty.

### Laws Regarding Strangers & Widows

The maltreatment and suppression of strangers, widows, the fatherless and the poor are strictly forbidden. A **stranger** or a foreigner should be treated with kind hospitality and sympathy. The children of Israel were reminded that they were once strangers in the land of Egypt

where they were being oppressed. They should therefore be more sympathetic to strangers who will come to their land in the future.

**Widows and the fatherless** are defenceless and open to abuse and oppression. The penalty for afflicting widows and the fatherless is very severe. God's wrath will be upon the offender and no mercy will be shown to him (22:24). God will hear the cry of the widow who is being afflicted. He will punish the offender with the penalty of death and as a result the wife of the offender will be widowed, and his children will become fatherless.

**The poor** are easily exploited by the rich. The laws are given to protect them from unscrupulous men. If the poor borrows money from his neighbour, the money-lender must not charge any interest. If he takes the borrower's only piece of garment for security, he must return to the poor borrower before the setting of the sun on that day.

## Laws on Civil Obligations

The people must always remember to fulfil *their obligations to God*. First, **the people of Israel should not revile God and the ruler of the people** (22:28). They shall not speak despicably or dishonourably of God and the one who rules the people. Although the word *gods* is in the plural form in Hebrew as also in Genesis 1:1, the context will determine whether it should be translated *gods* meaning pagan gods or the living and true God the LORD of the children of Israel. So the right translation here is "God."<sup>1</sup> They should not adopt a low view of God and despise or speak evil of Him. In like manner, they should not speak evil of their ruler or rulers who have the oversight of

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<sup>1</sup> In the light of Leviticus 24:15 *And thou shalt speak unto the children of Israel, saying, Whosoever curseth his God shall bear his sin. 16 And he that blasphemeth the name of the LORD, he shall surely be put to death, and all the congregation shall certainly stone him: as well the stranger, as he that is born in the land, when he blasphemeth the name of the LORD, shall be put to death.*

their welfare. They should respect their leaders.

**Secondly, the people must remember to consecrate what was due to God (22:29-30).** The offering of firstfruits of the land was required of the people (Exodus 13:13).<sup>2</sup> They are not only required to offer these to the LORD, they must also not delay in doing it. Man often has this tendency to delay the tithes and offerings due to God. Every male firstborn of their livestock is to be sacrificed unto the LORD after seven days from its birth. And the firstborn child shall be given to the LORD God. He belongs to Him. This principle applies to animals as well. On the eighth day they shall offer the firstborn animal to the LORD God. They shall be *holy unto God* for He is holy (22:31). And if they are to be holy, they must not eat the meat of an animal that has been torn to

pieces by other beasts. Such meat is considered unclean because the injured animal has come in contact with an unclean carnivorous beast, and the blood has not been properly drained from it. Such meat is to be given to the dogs.

A list of laws concerning **the treatment of others** is given in 23:1-9. *Thou shalt not raise a false report* (23:1) is an expansion of the Ninth Commandment which stipulates that one must not bear false witness. The law forbids slanderous and false testimonies. Such prohibition on the part of the people ensures the well-being of the community. This injunction leads on to the next (v.2) that one must not follow the majority of people to do evil. It is characteristic of people to desire to be accepted by the masses. The people must guard against such a tendency when it is evil and not good.

The subject of **perversion of justice** must be upheld so that one does not even show *countenance a*

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<sup>2</sup> Exodus 13:13 *And every firstling of an ass thou shalt redeem with a lamb; and if thou wilt not redeem it, then thou shalt break his neck: and all the firstborn of man among thy children shalt thou redeem.*

*poor man in his cause* (v.3). The word *countenance* can be translated “a show of favouritism.” Justice must be applied to the poor as equally as to the rich.

The **attitude of kindness** towards a person’s enemy foreshadows the teaching in the New Testament. This is no surprise because the teaching is from the same LORD God. The people of Israel are commanded to help the enemy. For example, if the enemy’s ox or ass has gone astray, they have to lead the same back to its owner. They shall also render help to the enemy when his donkey cannot bear the heavy burden it was bearing (vv.4-5).

The **principle of equal justice** to all irrespective of their economic and social standing is to be upheld. The poor shall not be deprived of justice (v.6). The godly person must not indulge himself in any kind of falsehood, and never to *slay the innocent and the righteous* by giving false

testimony. God will judge and punish the wicked (v.7).

Moreover, **the godly person must not take any bribe**, for such bribe has the tendency to blind the wise and pervert the words of the righteous (v.8). This section of miscellaneous judgments ends by repeating the warning not to afflict the stranger or foreigner. Justice too must be accorded to these people.

### **Laws on the Sabbath, Sacred Feasts & the Promised Land**

The doctrine of the Sabbath is now applied in relation to the land. The land is to be ploughed and sowed, and the produce harvested for six years. In the seventh year, the land has to be laid to rest. This is called *the sabbatical year* of the land. The purpose for this practice is to permit the poor to glean from these fields, and whatever remains the beasts can help themselves. (23:10-11). The *keeping of the Sabbath* on which there shall be no work also includes the beasts of

burden, the servants and the strangers. On the seventh day they are to rest and be refreshed (v.12). This section ends with the exhortation to the people to be deliberate and attentive to these laws and judgments, and they must avoid all manner of idolatry, even to the extent of not mentioning the names of other false gods (v.13).

The LORD commands that they keep **three major feasts in the year** in which all the males must congregate before Him (vv.14-19). These three feasts were: the Feast of Unleavened Bread; the Feast of Harvest; and the Feast of the Ingathering.

The Feast of the Unleavened Bread is linked to the Passover, and for seven days the people shall only eat unleavened bread (Exodus 12: 33-39). The second was the Feast of Harvest which is called in the New Testament as the Feast of Pentecost.<sup>3</sup> This was a joyous

occasion because the people brought in the fruits of their labour which the LORD God will have blessed them. The third and final is the Feast of Ingathering which is also called the Feast of Tabernacles. It was held at the end of the year.<sup>4</sup>

Three times a year all the males of Israel shall gather together before the LORD their GOD (23:17).<sup>5</sup> These three feasts are a time of great rejoicing and thanksgiving to God who has promised to bless His people. These feasts also give the opportunities for the people to come together to renew their fraternal bond and fellowship. They provide the means of spreading information and giving opportunities for families to be reunited. These feasts would result in fostering and forging national and spiritual unity.

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<sup>3</sup> It also called the Feast of Weeks in Exodus 34:22 because it was to be kept seven weeks after the Feast of Unleavened Bread (Leviticus 23:15-16; Deuteronomy 16:9).

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<sup>4</sup> For further reference: Leviticus 23:33-36; Deuteronomy 16:13-15; 31:10).

<sup>5</sup> Hebrew, *adonai, yahweh*.

### *PRACTICAL VALUE*

These laws and judgments of God touch on the pertinent aspects of communal life of the people. As we can evaluate they are pure and perfect. They are also precious and productive. If diligently and properly followed, they will promote the welfare and wealth of the people.

As a people of God, we should draw the principles underlying these judgments and laws, both for our own individual and corporate benefits. Theft is a social evil and people who commit it hope to enrich themselves. But when they are caught, they must make restitution which almost doubles the value of what they have stolen, thus they become poorer as a result. Interestingly, God's laws underscore the fact that one is held accountable for other people's property when they borrow or use them. This intimates that we are prone to be careless when we use the things that belong to other people.

Idolatry in any form is forbidden. We have to guard against this evil individually to see that we do not have any thing that takes first place in our hearts before God.

While the church should not swing towards trying to solve social issues like providing for others, we must be sensitive to the real needs of others especially towards fellow born-again Christians. We should do this in the right way.

Sabbath laws must be observed by Christians and when they have servant maids working for them, they should give their maids their Sabbath too. This is well-pleasing in the sight of God.

If we want to live godly lives and if we want the church to be strong and be doing the will of God so as to please and glorify Him, we ought to live by these principles. AMEN