

## *Open Heart, Open Bible*

Exodus and John's Gospel

Linking Theme: Redemption

*Passage for weekly readings (week 18):*

*Exodus 20 – 26*

### The Covenant with Moses

The heart behind the Ten Commandments, or the first four in particular, is that of a “jealous” God. The dictionary meaning of jealousy is “to feel uneasy or apprehensive of favours or preference given to others”, and the Lord knew well how easily His “firstborn son” could turn away from Him to foreign gods or customs. He wanted His people to fellowship with Him, and that required reverence and faithfulness. Hence, the prohibition of other gods, idols and disrespect (misusing His name), and the insistence on Sabbath-day rest and worship. The respect given to God is made communal by respect given to others in the last six Commandments, from parents to neighbours, which meant everyone. John McKay points out that the Ten Commandments are essentially a summary of the covenant between God and Israel and are unique among the laws. Only they were spoken directly to the people from the mountain (see Deuteronomy 5 v.22), while the rest were mediated through Moses (The Call and The Cross, p.73). The ancient rabbis recognised 613 commandments in the entire Law of Moses, but the Ten are the basis for all the others. By themselves they are called “the words of the covenant” (Exodus 34 v.28).

Whilst the sight on the mountain was undoubtedly awesome, the fear of death that it produced seems a questionable reaction. The Lord had already told the people that they were His “treasured possession” (19 v.5), and He surely would not put them to death for simply hearing His voice. That was the very thing He wanted them to be able to do! Moses’ reply is reassuring (v.20), but the fear that had fallen on the people seems disabling (prohibition), rather than enabling (reverence). Time will tell! The crucial importance of not bowing down to other gods is repeated.

Ch.’s 21 – 23 now give an amalgam of various criminal, civil and ceremonial laws that together make up the “Book of the Covenant” (ch.24 v.7). The reference to the piercing of the slave’s ear is picked up by David in the lovely Psalm 40 (v.’s 6-8), verses which have a definite Messianic element because they are referenced by the writer to Hebrews and interpreted in ch.10 v.’s 5-10 of that letter. Only a love relationship could make a slave want to remain in that place for life! This is when slavery becomes bond-service. The provisions regarding the daughter are for her protection (v.’s 7-11).

The basic guiding rule in many of these laws is the famous “eye for eye, tooth for tooth” (v.24), following which provision is made covering both eyes and teeth!

Even domestic animals given to wildness must be put to death if they kill people, together with their owner, if he has not been careful to keep the beast properly tethered. With this series of provisions (through to 22 v.15), adequate compensation for loss is the essential principle.

Ch.22 v.16 to ch.23 v.9 give the outline of the moral law, and the God behind it is the God of compassion (22 v.27). V.29 reiterates His claim on the firstborn, whether man or animal, and also the call to holiness, which here meant a lack of defilement (v.31). Ch.23 v.'s 10-13 continue the theme of helping the poor by letting the land lie fallow in the seventh year, the principle of the Sabbath rest. V.'s 14-19 introduce the ceremonial law in outline form, and describe the three Jewish Festivals to be observed annually (given in more detail in Leviticus 23). Each of them have important relevance for Christian worship:

- **Unleavened Bread** in its connection with **Passover** which becomes for us the **Lord's Supper** or **Eucharist**,
- **Harvest** or **Firstfruits**, which later became known as **Weeks**, and became **Pentecost** in the Christian calendar,
- **Ingathering**, later called **Tabernacles**, which is the time of year we would celebrate our own harvest, the Feast when Jesus spoke of the coming of the Holy Spirit, and the ingathering that could only come from His work (John 7 v.'s 37-39).

V.'s 20-33 state very clearly all the blessings which will accrue to Israel as she keeps the covenant, i.e. – she listens and obeys (v.22). The “little by little” process mentioned in v.30 is important to note – God doesn't give too much, too soon!

Moses then takes the Book of the Covenant, written down himself from the Lord's instructions, and the people agree to abide by it. The sacrifice seals the agreement, a solemn and very important occasion in the history of the nation of Israel. For the Christian, it prefigures the New Covenant agreement of Jesus with his disciples at the Last Supper. Moses, Aaron, his sons and the seventy elders eat in the Lord's presence (24 v.11), another remarkable parallel. Moses and Joshua then leave to ascend the mountain, but only Moses enters the cloud.

Ch.'s 25 – 30 now give in detail the information Moses requires to fashion the Tabernacle and institute the Priesthood. Remember that the whole object of redeeming His people was that they would serve or worship Him, that God would have a people He could relate to as His own. He wants this dearly! The Tabernacle and the Priesthood were the means by which that worship was enabled. The offering that Moses was instructed to take from the people was totally voluntary (v.2). The necessary items almost certainly came from the “plunder” that Israel was able to take from Egypt at the time of her departure (12 v.'s 35,36). Because

the sanctuary was to be where God dwelt, everything had to be constructed precisely according to the divine pattern. Exodus 25 gives the detail of the Tabernacle furnishings from the inside out. The Ark of the Covenant stood in the Holy of Holies, above which was the Atonement Cover or Mercy Seat (A.V.). The Table and the Lampstand stood in the Holy Place, symbolising the presence of God in His different facets (life and light). Again, Moses is told only to make these items according to the God-given pattern (v.40).

Ch.26 concentrates on the Tabernacle, giving the specific details of its construction and the materials to be used. It would take a “skilled craftsman” to do it (v.1). This movable tent must also be put together exactly as shown to Moses (v.30). The curtain which separated the Holy of Holies from the Holy Place (v.’s 31-33) was the curtain rent in two when Jesus “breathed His last” (Mark 15 v.’s 27,28). The entrance to the Holy Place, to the tent itself, was made in a similar way, with the same yarns.

### **Food for thought / discussion/ prayer**

1) We can either read the Ten Commandments positively or negatively - i.e. – that they are there to protect us and to bless us, or that they are there to restrict and curtail us. Certainly, the unbelieving world of today would take the second line. Are we partly responsible for this lack-lustre impression? If the Holy Spirit convicts us, perhaps we could pray for more of the grace of Jesus to invade His church (us) in these end times.

2) Look at ch.22 v.21 and ch.23 v.9. The Israelites should have learned compassion from their captivity, compassion which is the very nature of God Himself (22 v.27). Do we have to have been oppressed or troubled in some way in order to empathise with those we see to be under such difficulty? (see also 2 Corinthians 1 v.4). Can anyone share something of any such difficult experience, and speak of ways in which the Lord has redeemed it, to His glory?

3) The Covenant with Moses is the Old Covenant which was fulfilled by Jesus and replaced by the New Covenant in his blood (Luke 22 v.20, Hebrews 8 v.13). The Covenant with Noah will remain “as long as earth endures” (Gen.8 v.22), and the Abrahamic Covenant is still being worked out as long as the church is carrying out the Great Commission of Jesus (to bless all peoples on earth through the proclamation of Jesus Christ – Genesis 12 v.3 and Romans 16 v.25). What we have now is Jesus’ summary of the Ten Commandments (Matthew 22 v.’s 35-40 and Paul’s teaching in Romans 13 v.’s 9&10). What benefit is there from reading the law of Moses, when the N.T. simplifies it so?

**Next week’s passage:** Exodus 27 - 32

