

## **Studies in Exodus No. 28**

**Exodus 23:10-19**

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We are still reading the stipulations of the covenant that God made with Israel at Sinai. We have considered a body of personal injury laws, a body of laws concerning the loss of property, and an assorted body of laws that concern especially the obligation of every Israelite to the community. Tonight we conclude this section with a body of laws governing Israel's liturgical life, laws that will be given in much greater detail later in the Pentateuch. With Israel still in the wilderness and with no central sanctuary yet built, these laws can be given in outline, with the detail reserved for later. Another way of thinking about the principle of organization used to group these various laws in the next section is that the previous laws concern precepts that are to be observed at all times, whereas these following laws concern precepts that are to be observed at certain times only. [Cassuto, 300]

### **Text Comment**

v.12 Interestingly the sabbatical year has been retained only in the academic world. In the law of God it was the agricultural worker who profited most from it and, even now, it is the peasant and the factory worker who need it most and are least likely to receive it. "...be refreshed" in v. 12 is literally "catch one's breath." Imagine how agricultural workers would have looked forward to every seventh year. Forget two weeks vacation; an entire year off! The production of the previous six years is entirely adequate to provide for everyone – owners and workers alike – in the seventh year. If the industrial revolution were produced in large part from the Protestant work ethic, its managers failed to humanize it by applying such biblical insights as these. The factory owner is likely to say that he could not compete were he to do so; Holy Scripture and history combine to prove that one who seeks first the kingdom of God and his righteousness finds that the other things are added to him in abundance. And the proof of that is that it was during the time that the Sabbath was kept in Western culture that the foundation for its great wealth was laid. It is God's will that man work six days and rest a seventh and, as in so much of this legislation, the implied threat is that if God's will is flaunted, he will see to it that the sinner will face the consequences. God is not a taskmaster and his people are not to be either. There are other things more important than maximizing profit, and one of them is a just and humane treatment of one's workers. Part of that is a holiday every week, the Sabbath day. Here the accent falls especially on the design of this legislation – both the sabbatical year and the weekly Sabbath day, to help to give relief to various classes of people – the poor and the workers – as well as the animals who are both given time for refreshment every week and are free in the sabbatical year to take what the fields, vineyards, and orchards produce naturally, without planting or cultivation. [Ellison, 132] The produce of that seventh year did not belong to the owner of the field but to the poor and the animals. We are taught here that there are many reasons to keep God's laws. Here the rationale for Sabbath-keeping is not God's having created the world in six days and rested the seventh, nor as a memorial of Israel's redemption, but for humanitarian purposes.

The provision for the animals, both wild and domestic, is an expression of the fact that God is their creator too and that he provides for them. The Lord Jesus reminded us that the Lord cares for little sparrows and feeds the ravens. We may wonder about wild animals – where they go at night, what they do all day (we look for deer and elk, for bear and even for lions at our cabin in Colorado, but hardly ever see them when we are looking for them; then, suddenly, when we are not expecting to see them, there they are! We are always wondering where they are the rest of the time!) – well God watches them. He loves them and enjoys them. We love to watch them, even at a zoo, and God must too! And if he loves to watch them, he also provides for them.

In any case, as religious observances, both the weekly Sabbath and the sabbatical year were expressions of faith in the Lord who promised to provide for their needs. You will remember that the later prophets saw the 70 years of exile in Babylon as the land's rest – the sabbatical rest it had not been given as it should have been. The Sabbath was so fundamental that it was part of the Ten Words, but it is mentioned here also because the law here is dealing with days dedicated to rest, refreshment, and the service of the Lord.

By the way, we know nowadays that it is responsible agriculture to allow fields to lie fallow at intervals. The farmers in that day no doubt knew this as well. But this was not the principle reason for the law, though the law also conveyed that benefit. The laws concerning clean and unclean foods can be seen to have had some beneficial results for Israel's health. That is not the reason for the laws *per se*, but God's laws often bring unannounced and unanticipated blessings just as disobedience often brings all manner of unanticipated trouble. It is no accident, for example, that promiscuous sex has all manner of grisly consequences for a person's health.

- v.13 A reminder that there is but one living God with whom they have to do; it is his will and the will of no other that must be our duty and his promise of blessing that must be our hope. A general statement like this serves as a kind of transition to the next body of laws.
- v.14 These feasts were also a regular interruption of the daily round of life. They are just mentioned here because Israel was still in the wilderness. Their regulation will be given in detail later.
- v.15 The feasts of Israel's liturgical calendar were related to the cycles of nature and then further related to events in salvation history. It was this latter feature that lifted them above the seasonal harvest feasts of other ancient Near Eastern peoples. It is sometimes argued that we shouldn't celebrate Christmas or Easter because they originated from pagan feasts, or, at least, were observed at the same time, or as substitutions for pagan feasts. But that was true of the feasts of the OT law. Here is the Lord redeeming the culture and putting the natural practices of human beings to better use. Passover and Unleavened Bread came at the beginning of the barley harvest – the first grain harvest of the year (April) – and provided a break before the heavy work of the summer began. [Ellison, 133] But it also was a dramatic recreation of the history of Israel's deliverance from Egypt.

v.16 Harvest or what would be called later the Feast of Weeks and, still later, Pentecost, was at the beginning of the wheat harvest (late May or early June), and provided a break at the height of the summer's work while Ingathering or Tabernacles marked the last harvest of the year (late September or early October), the harvest of the orchard and the vineyard, before the Autumn rains started the cycle again. Tabernacles, we learn in Lev. 23:43, also called "Booths," also was a remembrance of Israel's deliverance and of her living in tents in the wilderness. Weeks or Pentecost was also associated with the giving of the law at Sinai.

v.17 The three feasts were pilgrimage feasts and the men, at least, had to be present at the tabernacle and later the temple. We learn in 1 Samuel 1 that women could and often did go with their husbands. But this would have been difficult for large families and families with little children and, as we see many times in God's law, the Lord has a care for the welfare, even the convenience of his people. Families could remain at home but, even they participated in the holidays and enjoyed the festive character of these feasts.

Since each feast was celebrated at a harvest, the commandment not to come empty-handed was easy to fulfill.

v.18 Here leaven may be symbolic of corruption and so of impurity as it is sometimes, but by no means always, is in the New Testament. Interestingly, there were offerings that were to be offered with leavened bread (e.g. the fellowship offering, Lev. 7:13). The fat, the richest part of the meat was the portion that belonged to God. If left over night it might become rancid and so unfit as an offering to God. Care must be taken to give God the best. That commitment lies at the bottom of all true holiness of life.

v.19 The best of the firstfruits was the kind of freewill offering that would honor God as the source of one's prosperity.

The prohibition against cooking a young goat in its mother's milk illustrates the importance of reading the Bible in its historical context. The rabbis never agreed on the reason for this law but nevertheless spun out regulations forbidding the eating of meat and dairy products in the same meal. Among the ultra orthodox Jews different crockery and cutlery must be used for meat and milk, and, where practicable, separate kitchens and refrigerators. [Ellison, 134] But this prohibition, archaeological evidence now almost certainly has shown, was, in effect, a command not to worship as the pagans did. It was a commandment requiring God's people to be separate in their worship. Like the commandment in Deut. 14:1 against cutting oneself or shaving the front of one's head for the dead, or the commandment against getting a tattoo, the objection is not to the act itself – which separated from its historical context in Canaanite usage is entirely unobjectionable – but to the act as part of pagan worship. An Ugaritic poem, describing a Canaanite rite, reads: "Cook a kid in the milk, a lamb in the cream." This was apparently part of a fertility rite thought to have some magical power, the kind of magic forbidden already in 22:18.

There are many solemn things in God's law. We have already read a number of times of infractions of God's law that were to be punished with the death penalty. God's holiness and justice, man's sinfulness, the impending judgment of God: these are solemn and solemnizing things. Any Christian who takes them seriously, as he should, will have an air of seriousness about him. He will be a man in deadly earnest. He will not be carefree and lighthearted about many things. When the world laughs, he often will not. He will weep over things the world finds of little consequence. The Lord Jesus' own life is the perfect demonstration of these facts.

So there is a reason at least we can understand why an unbeliever such as H.L. Mencken should caricature the Puritan – by which he meant simply the really serious Christian, the Christian who takes the teaching of the Bible seriously – as “a person with a haunting fear that someone, somewhere, is happy.” The world finds Christian seriousness a heavy thing. But then the world is not thinking seriously about the law of God; it does not reckon with the impending judgments of the Lord; it has no living expectation of divine wrath falling upon sinners.

But, we Christians should be the first to confess that sometimes we do not adequately represent and demonstrate the other side of Christian emotion: the joy of the Lord. For, surely, as the entire Bible teaches, there should be no people in all the world happier than Christians for there are no people with a better reason to be happy. It was Samuel Rutherford who once said, “I wonder, many times, that ever a child of God should have a sad heart, considering what his Lord is preparing for him.”

Or listen to this from a long ago Christian convert in India, writing in a personal letter to a friend.

“How I long for my bed! Not that I may sleep -- I lie awake often and long -- but to hold sweet communion with my God. What shall I render unto him for all his revelations and gifts to me? Were there no historical evidence of the truth of Christianity, were there no well-established miracles, still I should believe that the religion propagated by the fishermen of Galilee is divine. The holy joys it brings to me must be from heaven. Do I write this boastingly, brother? Nay, it is with tears of humble gratitude that I tell of the goodness of the Lord.” [Bapa Padmanji]

The knowledge of God, the love of Christ, the forgiveness of sins, the fellowship of the saints, high purpose in life, and the hope of life in heaven with everlasting joy upon our heads, these are reasons to be happy indeed! But many Christians too much of the time and all Christians some of the time find it difficult to rejoice as they know they should. The trials of life bear them down, real sorrows that *must be* sorrows: their own sins, the unbelief of loved ones, pure longings unfulfilled, sickness, pain and death, a world living in utter indifference to the glory of God – who should not be sad about such things? Indeed. And Christian joy is never sentimental in the Bible; it is never insincere; it is never superficial. Indeed, when Paul describes the Christian as “sorrowful yet always rejoicing” he is as much as saying that Christian joy both must and can exist in the heart side by side with a feeling knowledge of painful realities.

And here we come at last to the laws we have read tonight. These are, at least most of them, *laws of joy*. These are laws that require God's people to take refreshment, to feast, and to enjoy a party on him. Alas, human sin and folly being what it is, God's people have sometimes managed

to turn even *these* laws into drudgery, but they are, in fact, the furthest thing from drudgery. They are designed by God to inject joy into our lives. Our heavenly Father knows full well how difficult life can be; he knows how many burdens we carry. He knows how wearying work can be. And so he placed – smack dab in the middle of his holy law – these requirements that his people take time off for refreshment, that they regularly have holidays, and that often they make those holidays still more delightful and refreshing by holding great feasts on them. This is astonishing, if you think of it. The rationale provided for these laws, both here and elsewhere, is that God’s people will be refreshed and have celebrations in their lives. A day off every seven (note that here the point is simply the rest for us); a year off every seven; three great feasts every year (two of them lasting an entire week): these are God’s gifts to his people and his provision for their happiness. No doubt, provisions like these put us on our mettle to work very hard the other days of the week and the other weeks of the year, but here the emphasis falls on our refreshment. And notice how everyone is included: the slave, even the animals. And lest anyone miss the nature of these three feasts, the regulation we are given elsewhere, in Leviticus and Deuteronomy, makes clear that these are precisely those kinds of feasts that would become for children and for a family what Thanksgiving and Christmas have become for us. This is more unique than you may realize. It is the feast, not the fast that is the symbol of the Christian message and the Christian faith. It is Christmas not Ramadan that is the great holiday of our faith. It is rejoicing with good food and drink in what God has done, not applying ourselves to self-denial that is the public face of our church. Of, it should be if it is not.

Later, when new feasts were added to the calendar, they also had these features designed to increase pleasure. So, on the Feast of Trumpets, what would later be known as *Rosh Hashanah*, Nehemiah sent the people home, after the reading and preaching of the Word had depressed them with the knowledge of their sins, saying,

“Go and enjoy choice food and sweet drinks, and send some to those who have nothing prepared. This day is sacred to our Lord. Do not grieve, for the joy of the Lord is your strength.” [8:10]

Take note of that amazing statement. A day that is sacred to our Lord becomes, by his intention, a day of happiness for us.

And when, in Esther’s day, *Purim* was instituted as a remembrance of the Lord’s deliverance of the Jews in Babylon, the day was celebrated by feasting, by giving presents to one another, and gifts to the poor. God wants his people to be happy. He wants us to be sad about some things, but, just as surely, he wants us to be happy about many others and really to enjoy that happiness. Charles Simeon was only being true to the burden of biblical teaching when he made it his characteristic greeting to members of his congregation, when he paid a pastoral visit, “I am come to inquire after your welfare. Are you happy?” [Moule, *Charles Simeon*, 35] God is concerned that his people be happy. He commands them to rejoice in many places; he gives them reasons to be happy; he draws near to make them happy; and he also provides for special occasions of happiness in his law.

The pagans had their rituals too, but in their theory their gods needed the food they brought for them. If they enjoyed their ritual life – sensual as it was – it was not because their gods were

giving *them* gifts! But even our gifts to the Lord ended up making a holiday for us and filling us with that holiday spirit. Yahweh had no need for Israel's food and most of the food that was brought to the sanctuary for sacrifice – and this was particularly good food – *they ate themselves, or they gave to others to eat*. And, according to Deuteronomy 16 – where these same three pilgrimage feasts are commanded again – it was also important to the Lord that his people *enjoy* these feasts, not only that they observe them.

There is much more that will be said about the Sabbath day, for example, elsewhere in the Law and the Bible. Here the simple emphasis falls on it being God's gift of refreshment for us and, in fact, that is the main thing the Bible always says about the Sabbath day. As Jesus himself said to some men who had lost touch with the fact that the Sabbath was the Lord's gift of joy to his people, "the Sabbath is made for man, not man for the Sabbath." And so too the three feasts and the sabbatical year. They too were made for man. The three annual celebrations are all *feasts*. They were times of convivial fellowship with family and loved ones, times when the best food was eaten, and times for all manner of interesting things for children (including getting to camp out for a week in the Autumn!). All of this material in these laws has this same rationale: it is for us and for our happiness and refreshment that God has given us these holidays. It is ours now to obey God's law, here as everywhere else.

I do not hesitate to say that one thing that ought to distinguish Christians from unbelievers is how faithfully they see to having wonderful times and a great deal of pure fun! We are to be the people of the feast, the party, the celebration. And ours are all enjoyed *coram Deo* and so they leave no regrets, no hangovers, no sour taste in the mouth. They refresh us not only physically – these celebrations of ours – but spiritually as well. They provide a deeper joy, more solid, permanent, and pure. This is what God commands of us here: a real holiday every week and feasts throughout the year that we not only enjoy ourselves but help others to enjoy as well. It is no accident, brothers and sisters, that Christmas, the happiest time of the year for everyone in the Western world and, increasingly, for everyone in the world, is a Christian feast, a Christian holiday, a Christian gift to the world. Thanksgiving is too, for that matter, a harvest festival after the pattern of these laid down in the law of God. As you enter into this holiday season, be sure that you take to heart your privilege and your responsibility to make these days particularly happy and refreshing ones for yourself, your family, your friends, *and*, for everyone of us, for someone else who may need more than he or she has to enjoy the feasts as they ought to be enjoyed. Whatever it is: more food, more company, more gifts, it is ours to provide because our heavenly Father has made us the people of feasts.

But what of those among us who hear this and feel not anticipation but defeat. At this moment, perhaps for a long time, there has been much more to mourn than to rejoice over, or so it seems. Well, of course, that is never *actually* true, however much it may seem true. If heaven exists as it does; and if a Christian is going there forever as he or she is; there is *always* much, much more to rejoice over than to mourn. But, still, it is hard to rejoice as we should when our hearts are filled with pain.

Well let me leave you with this. Do you remember poor old Mr. Ready-to-Halt in the second part of John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*? Mr. Ready-to-Halt had many problems and, if the truth be told, his pilgrimage to the Celestial City had been harder than most. He had to make his

way with a crutch. But he happened to be there when Great Heart and his companions despoiled Doubting Castle, rescued the poor pilgrims who had been imprisoned there, and killed Giant Despair and cut off his head. In their great joy over this victory, very naturally Christiana and all of her companions began to make merry. Christiana played the violin and her daughter Mercy played the lute, and Mr. Ready-to-Halt took Mr. Despondency's daughter – whose name was Much-afraid – and began to dance with her in the road. True, Bunyan says, “he could not dance without one crutch in his hand; but, I promise you, he footed it well.” In other words, some will have an easier time of it than others – in joy as in everything else – but that is no reason not to get as much of this wonderful gift of joy as you can. And where else will you find it so easily but in those seasons of joy that God has provided for you.

As the Scripture says, there is a time to weep and a time to laugh, a time to mourn and a time to dance. And to ensure that we would laugh and dance, feast and celebrate, the Lord put occasions for such in his holy law and commanded us to obey. To be sure that we would rejoice *in him and his salvation* – the kind of joy that really enriches a human life, permanently not temporarily – he connected his great acts of salvation to feasts that we would look forward to, filled them with good food and fellowship, and urged us to enjoy it all as his gift.

It is the Christian's duty, C.S. Lewis once said, to be as happy as he can! [Sheldon Vanauken, *A Severe Mercy*, 189] God gives us helps to enable us to perform all our duties. And feasts and holidays are one of his greatest helps to joy. Let us keep all the words of this law.