

INTRODUCTION TO EXODUS CHAPTER 23

This chapter continues and concludes the acts that passed in the first session (if I may so call it) upon mount Sinai. Here are,

I. Some laws of universal obligation, relating especially to the ninth commandment, against bearing false witness **#Ex 23:1**, and giving false judgment, **#Ex 23:2-3,6-8**. Also a law of doing good to our enemies (**#Ex 23:4-5**), and not oppressing strangers, **#Ex 23:9**.

II. Some laws peculiar to the Jews. The sabbatical year **#Ex 23:10-11**, the three annual feasts **#Ex 23:14-17**, with some laws pertaining thereto.

III. Gracious promises of the completing of the mercy God had begun for them, upon condition of their obedience. That God would conduct them through the wilderness (**#Ex 23:20-24**), that he would prosper all they had (**#Ex 23:25-26**), that he would put them in possession of Canaan, **#Ex 23:27-31**. But they must not mingle themselves with the nations, **#Ex 23:32-33**.

Ver. 1.

Here are,

I. Cautions concerning judicial proceedings; it was not enough that they had good laws, better than ever any nation had, but care must be taken for the due administration of justice according to those laws.

1. The witnesses are here cautioned that they neither occasion an innocent man to be indicted, by raising a false report of him and setting common fame against him, nor assist in the prosecution of an innocent man, or one whom they do not know to be guilty, by *putting their hand* in swearing as witnesses against him, **#Ex 23:1**. Bearing false witness against a man, in a matter that touches his life, has in it all the guilty of lying, perjury, malice, theft, murder, with the additional stains of colouring all with a pretence of justice and involving many others in the same guilt. There is scarcely any one act of wickedness that a man can possibly be guilty of which has in it a greater complication of villainies than this has. Yet the former part of this caution is to be extended, not only to judicial proceedings, but to common conversation; so that slandering and backbiting are a species of falsewitness-bearing. A man's reputation lies as much at the mercy of every company as his estate or life does at the mercy of a judge or jury; so that he who raises, or knowingly spreads, a false report against his neighbour, especially if the report be made to wise and good men whose esteem one would desire to enjoy, sins as much against the laws of truth, justice, and charity, as a false witness does--with this further mischief, that he leaves it not in the power of the person injured to obtain redress. That which we translate, Thou shalt not *raise*, the margin reads, Thou shalt not *receive* a false report; for sometimes the receiver, in this case, is as bad as the thief; and a backbiting tongue would not do so much mischief as it does if it were not countenanced. Sometimes we cannot avoid hearing a false report, but we must not receive it, that is, we must not hear it with pleasure and delight as those that rejoice in iniquity, nor give credit to it as long as there remains any cause to question the truth of it. This is charity to our neighbour's good name, and doing as we would be done by.

2. The judges are here cautioned not to pervert judgment.

(1.) They must not be overruled, either by might or multitude, to go against their

consciences in giving judgment, **#Ex 23:2**. With the Jews causes were tried by a bench of justices, and judgment given according to the majority of votes, in which cause every particular justice must go according to truth, as it appeared to him upon the strictest and most impartial enquiry, though the multitude of the people, and their outcries, or, the sentence of the *rabbim* (we translate it *many*), the more ancient and honourable of the justices, went the other way. Therefore (as with us), among the Jews, the junior upon the bench voted first, that he might not be swayed nor overruled by the authority of the senior. Judges must not respect the persons either of the parties or of their fellow-judges. The former part of this verse also gives a general rule for all, as well as judges, not *to follow a multitude to do evil*. General usage will never excuse us in a bad practice; nor is the broad way ever the better or safer for its being tracked and crowded. We must enquire what we ought to do, not what the majority do; because we must be judged by our Master, not by our fellow servants, and it is too great a compliment to be willing to go to hell for company.

(2.) They must not pervert judgment, no, not in favour of a poor man, **#Ex 23:3**. Right must in all cases take place and wrong must be punished, and justice never biased nor injury connived at under pretence of charity and compassion. If a poor man be a bad man, and do a bad thing, it is foolish pity to let him fare the better for his poverty, **#De 1:16-17**.

(3.) Neither must they pervert judgment in prejudice to a poor man, nor suffer him to be wronged because he had not wherewithal to right himself; in such cases the judges themselves must become advocates for the poor, as far as their cause was good and honest (**#Ex 23:6**):

"Thou shalt not wrest the judgment of the poor; remember they are thy poor, bone of thy bone, thy poor neighbours, thy poor brethren; let them not therefore fare the worse for being poor."

(4.) They must dread the thoughts of assisting or abetting a bad cause (**#Ex 23:7**):

"Keep thyself far from a false matter; do not only keep thyself free from it, nor think it enough to say thou art unconcerned in it, but keep far from it, dread it as a dangerous snare. The innocent and righteous thou wouldest not, for all the world, slay with thy own hands; keep far therefore from a false matter, for thou knowest not but it may end in that, and the righteous God will not leave such wickedness unpunished: I will not justify the wicked,"

that is,

"I will condemn him that unjustly condemns others."

Judges themselves are accountable to the great judge.

(5.) They must not take bribes, **#Ex 23:8**. They must not only not be swayed by a gift to give an unjust judgment, to condemn the innocent, or acquit the guilty, or adjudge a man's right from him, but they must not so much as take a gift, lest it should have a bad influence upon them, and overrule them, contrary to their intentions; for it has a strange tendency to blind those that otherwise would do well.

(6.) They must not oppress a stranger, **#Ex 23:9**. Though aliens might not inherit lands among them, yet they must have justice done them, must peaceably enjoy their own, and be redressed if they were wronged, though they were strangers to the commonwealth of Israel. It is an instance of the equity and goodness of our law, that, if an alien be tried for

any crime except treason, the one half of his jury, if he desire it, shall be foreigners; they call it a trial *per mediatatem linguae*, a kind provision that strangers may not be oppressed. The reason here given is the same with that in **#Ex 22:21**, *You were strangers*, which is here elegantly enforced, *You know the heart of a stranger*; you know something of the griefs and fears of a stranger by sad experience, and therefore, being delivered, can the more easily put your souls into their souls' stead.

II. Commands concerning neighbourly kindnesses. We must be ready to do all good offices, as there is occasion, for any body, yea even for those that have done us ill offices, **#Ex 23:4-5**. The command of loving our enemies, and doing good to those that hate us, is not only a new, but an *old* commandment, **#Pr 25:21-22**. Infer hence,

1. If we must do this kindness for an enemy, much more for a friend, though an enemy only is mentioned, because it is supposed that a man would not be unneighbourly to any unless such as he had a particular spleen against.
2. If it be wrong not to prevent our enemy's loss and damage, how much worse is it to occasion harm and loss to him, or any thing he has.
3. If we must bring back our neighbours' cattle when they go astray, much more must we endeavour, by prudent admonitions and instructions, to bring back our neighbours themselves, when they go astray in any sinful path, **#Jas 5:19-20**. And, if we must endeavour to help up a fallen ass, much more should we endeavour, by comforts and encouragements, to help up a sinking spirit, *saying to those that are of a fearful heart, Be strong*. We must seek the relief and welfare of others *as our own*, **#Php 2:4**. *If thou sayest, Behold, we know it not, doth not he that pondereth the heart consider it?* See **#Pr 24:11-12**.

Ver. 10.

Here is,

I. The institution of the sabbatical year, **#Ex 23:10-11**. Every seventh year the land was to rest; they must not plough nor sow it at the beginning of the year, and then they could not expect any great harvest at the end of the year: but what the earth did produce of itself should be eaten from hand to mouth, and not laid up. Now this was designed,

1. To show what a plentiful land that was into which God was bringing them--that so numerous a people could have rich maintenance out of the produce of so small a country, without foreign trade, and yet could spare the increase of every seventh year.
2. To remind them of their dependence upon God their great landlord, and their obligation to use the fruit of their land as he should direct. Thus he would try their obedience in a matter that nearly touched their interest. Afterwards we find that their disobedience to this command was a forfeiture of the promises, **#2Ch 36:21**.
3. To teach them a confidence in the divine Providence, while they did their duty--that, as the sixth day's manna served for two day's meat, so the sixth year's increase should serve for two years' subsistence. Thus they must learn not to *take thought for their life*, **#Mt 6:25**. If we are prudent and diligent in our affairs, we may trust Providence to furnish us with the bread of the day in its day.

II. The repetition of the law of the fourth commandment concerning the weekly sabbath,

#Ex 23:12. Even in the year of rest they must not think that the sabbath day was laid in common with the other days, but, even that year, it must be religiously observed; yet thus some have endeavoured to take away the observance of the sabbath, by pretending that every day must be a sabbath day.

III. All manner of respect to the gods of the heathen is here strictly forbidden, **#Ex 23:13.** A general caution is prefixed to this, which has reference to all these precepts: *In all things that I have said unto you, be circumspect.* We are in danger of missing our way on the right hand and on the left, and it is at our peril if we do; therefore we have need to look about us. A man may ruin himself through mere carelessness, but he cannot save himself without great care and circumspection: particularly, since idolatry was a sin which they were much addicted to, and would be greatly tempted to, they must endeavour to blot out the remembrance of the gods of the heathen, and must disuse and forget all their superstitious forms of speech, and never mention them but with detestation. In Christian schools and academies (for it is in vain to think of reforming the play-houses), it were to be wished that the names and stories of the heathen deities, or demons rather, were not so commonly and familiarly used as they are, even with intimations of respect, and sometimes with forms of invocation. Surely we have *not so learned Christ.*

IV. Their solemn religious attendance on God in the place which he should choose is here strictly required, **#Ex 23:14-17.**

1. Thrice a year all their males must come together in a holy convocation, that they might the better know and love one another, and keep up their communion as a dignified and peculiar people.
2. They must come together *before the Lord* (**#Ex 23:17**) to present themselves before him, looking towards the place where his honour dwelt, and to pay their homage to him as their great Lord, from and under whom they held all their enjoyments.
3. They must feast together before the Lord, eating and drinking together, in token of their joy in God and their grateful sense of his goodness to them; *for a feast is made for laughter*, **#Ec 10:19.** O what a good Master do we serve, who has made it our duty to *rejoice before him*, who feasts his servants when they are in waiting! Never let religion be called a melancholy thing, when its solemn services are solemn feasts.
4. They must not *appear before God empty*, **#Ex 23:15.** Some freewill offering or other they must bring, in token of their respect and gratitude to their great benefactor; and, as they were not allowed to come empty-handed, so we must not come to worship God empty-hearted; our souls must be filled with grace, with pious and devout affections, holy desires towards him, and dedications of ourselves to him, for *with such sacrifices God is well-pleased.*
5. The passover, pentecost, and feast of tabernacles, in spring, summer, and autumn, were the three times appointed for their attendance: not in winter, because travelling was then uncomfortable; not in the midst of their harvest, because then they were otherwise employed; so that they had no reason to say that he *made them to serve with an offering, or wearied them with incense.*

V. Some particular directions are here given about the three feasts, though not so fully as afterwards.

1. As to the passover, it was not to be offered with leavened bread, for at that feast all leaven was to be cast out, nor was the fat of it to remain until the morning, lest it

should become offensive, **#Ex 23:18**.

2. At the feast of pentecost, when they were to begin their harvest, they must bring *the first of their first-fruits* to God, by the pious presenting of which the whole harvest was sanctified, **#Ex 23:19**.
3. At the feast of *ingathering*, as it is called (**#Ex 23:16**), they must give God thanks for the harvest-mercies they had received, and must depend upon him for the next harvest, and must not think to receive benefit by that superstitious usage of some of the Gentiles, who, it is said, at the end of their harvest, *seethed a kid in its dam's milk*, and sprinkled that milk-pottage, in a magical way, upon their gardens and fields, to make them more fruitful next year. But Israel must abhor such foolish customs.

Ver. 20.

Three gracious promises are here made to Israel, to engage them to their duty and encourage them in it; and each of the promises has some needful precepts and cautions joined to it.

1. It is here promised that they should be guided and kept in their way through the wilderness to the land of promise: *Behold, I send an angel before thee* (**#Ex 23:20**), *my angel* (**#Ex 23:23**), a created angel, say some, a minister of God's providence, employed in conducting and protecting the camp of Israel; that it might appear that God took a particular care of them, he appointed one of his chief servants to make it his business to attend them, and see that they wanted for nothing. Others suppose it to be the Son of God, the angel of the covenant; for the Israelites in the wilderness are said to *tempt Christ*; and we may as well suppose him God's messenger, and the church's Redeemer, before his incarnation, as *the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world*. And we may the rather think he was pleased to undertake the deliverance and guidance of Israel because they were typical of his great undertaking. It is promised that this blessed angel should *keep them in the way*, though it lay through a wilderness first, and afterwards through their enemies' country; thus God's spiritual Israel shall be kept through the wilderness of this earth, and from the insults of the gates of hell. It is also promised that he should bring them into the place which God had not only designed but prepared for them: and thus Christ has prepared a place for his followers, and will preserve them to it, for he is faithful to him that appointed him. The precept joined with this promise is that they be observant of, and obedient to, this angel whom God would send before them (**#Ex 23:21**):

"Beware of him, and obey his voice in every thing; provoke him not in any thing, for it is at your peril if you do, he will visit your iniquity."

Note,

1. Christ is the author of salvation to those only that obey him. The word of command is *Hear you him*, **#Mt 17:5**. *Observe what he hath commanded*, **#Mt 28:20**.
2. Our necessary dependence upon the divine power and goodness should awe us into obedience. We do well to take heed of provoking our protector and benefactor, because if our defence depart from us, and the streams of his goodness be cut off, we are undone. Therefore,

"Beware of him, and carry it towards him with all possible reverence and caution. Fear the Lord, and his goodness."

3. Christ will be faithful to those who are faithful to him, and will espouse their cause who adhere to his: *I will be an adversary to thine adversaries, #Ex 23:22*. The league shall be offensive and defensive, like that with Abraham, *I will bless him that blesseth thee, and curse him that curseth thee*. Thus is God pleased to twist his interests and friendships with his people's.

II. It is promised that they should have a comfortable settlement in the land of Canaan, which they hoped now (though it proved otherwise) within a few months to be in the possession of, #Ex 23:24-26. Observe,

1. How reasonable the conditions of this promise are--only that they should serve their own God, who was indeed the only true God, and not the gods of the nations, which were no gods at all, and which they had no reason at all to have any respect for. They must not only not worship their gods, but they must utterly overthrow them, in token of their great abhorrence of idolatry, their resolution never to worship idols themselves, and their care to prevent any other from worshipping them; as the converted conjurers *burnt their books, #Ac 19:19*.

2. How rich the particulars of this promise are.

(1.) The comfort of their food. He shall *bless thy bread and thy water*; and God's blessing will make bread and water more refreshing and nourishing than a feast of fat things and wines on the lees without that blessing.

(2.) The continuance of their health:

"I will take sickness away, either prevent it or remove it. Thy land shall not be visited with epidemical diseases, which are very dreadful, and sometimes have laid countries waste."

(3.) The increase of their wealth. Their cattle should not be barren, nor cast their young, which is mentioned as an instance of prosperity, #Job 21:10.

(4.) The prolonging of their lives to old age:

"The number of thy days I will fulfil, and they shall not be cut off in the midst by untimely deaths."

Thus hath godliness the *promise of the life that now is*.

III. It is promised that they should conquer and subdue their enemies, the present occupants of the land of Canaan, who must be driven out to make room for them. This God would do,

1. Effectually by his power (#Ex 23:17-18); not so much by the sword and bow of Israel as by the terrors which he would strike into the Canaanites. Though they were so obstinate as not to be willing to submit to Israel, resign their country, and retire elsewhere, which they might have done, yet they were so dispirited that they were not able to stand before them. This completed their ruin; such power had the devil in them that they would resist, but such power had God over them that they could not. *I will send my fear before thee*; and those that fear will soon flee. Hosts of hornets made way for the hosts of Israel; such mean creatures can God make use of for the chastising of his people's enemies, as in the plagues of Egypt. When God pleases, hornets can drive out Canaanites, as well as lions could, #Jos 24:12. 2. He would do it

gradually, in wisdom (#Ex 23:29-30), not all at once, but by little and little. As the Canaanites had kept possession till Israel had grown into a people, so there should still be some remains of them till Israel should grow so numerous as to replenish the whole. Note, The wisdom of God is to be observed in the gradual advances of the church's interests. It is in real kindness to the church that its enemies are subdued by little and little; for thus we are kept upon our guard, and in a continual dependence upon God. Corruptions are thus driven out of the hearts of God's people; not all at once, but by little and little; the old man is crucified, and therefore dies slowly. God, in his providence, often delays mercies, because we are not ready for them. Canaan has room enough to receive Israel, but Israel is not numerous enough to occupy Canaan. We are not straitened in God; if we are straitened, it is in ourselves. The land of Canaan is promised them (#Ex 23:31) in its utmost extent, which yet they were not possessed of till the days of David; and by their sins they soon lost possession. The precept annexed to this promise is that they should not make any friendship, nor have any familiarity, with idolaters, #Ex 23:32-33. Idolaters must not so much as sojourn in their land, unless they renounced their idolatry. Thus they must avoid the reproach of intimacy with the worshippers of false gods and the danger of being drawn to worship with them. By familiar converse with idolaters, their dread and detestation of the sin would wear off; they would think it no harm, in compliment to their friends, to pay some respect to their gods, and so by degrees would be drawn into the fatal snare. Note: Those that would be kept from bad courses must keep from bad company; it is dangerous living in a bad neighbourhood; others' sins will be our snares, if we look not well to ourselves. We must always look upon our greatest danger to be from those that would cause us to sin against God. Whatever friendship is pretended, that is really our worst enemy that draws us from our duty.