

## **The Blessings of God**

Exodus 23:20-33

Why is this so hard? Studying Exodus, verse by verse, chapter by chapter. Why is that so hard? And I know it is. So why is that?

I would suggest two possible answers. The first is that we are simply untrained in studying the law. At least, perhaps, unaccustomed to it. It is seldom preached from the pulpit anymore. And as a whole, the church loses something in that. The church loses the ability to examine exactly how it is that God wants us to love him. We are so self-absorbed in our day and age that we don't even think about it in that sense. We think about loving other people the way we want to love them, as if that was what love is. We think of loving God with the same self-directed perspective. But in the Bible, and in a good portion of the Bible, what we read is God teaching us what he wants from us, "the duty which God requires of man," as our Shorter Catechism puts it. And so the law is the abiding rule of our loving obedience which we do in thankful gratitude for the salvation which God has accomplished for us. In other words, in the Apostle John's words,

1 John 5:2 "By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God and obey his commandments. 3 For this is the love of God, that we keep his commandments. And his commandments are not burdensome."

The second reason we find it hard to study the law is because the law is so often misused and abused. It is preached in such a way that you come away finding yourself oppressed into thinking that you have to perform to a certain level of obedience in order to earn or achieve a right standing with God. And yet, the first use of the law as all good theologians are careful to articulate, is that

it is to drive you to Christ. As a non-Christian, it is to convince and convict you of your sin and bring you to repentance and faith in Jesus Christ. As a Christian, it is to remind you all the more fully just how fully you are bound to Christ for having fulfilled the law and endured its curse. I don't think you can be reminded of that often enough.

And in that context, we should never neglect a study of the blessings of God attached to his law, and that focus is what I want to emphasize this afternoon. The blessings of God. I won't go through all the specific examples of case law too thoroughly this afternoon, those verses at the end of chapter 22 and the beginning of chapter 23. I'm not skipping them entirely, but I want my point today to be as clear it can be, that the purpose of studying all these things is not simply for you to grasp more thoroughly what it was that the people of Old Testament Israel were required to do in obedience to God. Rather, even in the context of giving that law at Mt. Sinai, we see so clearly in our text that,

### **I. The promised blessings of God are displayed through the history of the nation of Israel.**

That's the value of this history lesson. Not so much the history of law but the history of blessing. The history of God's grace made evident to his people. And what were those blessings? What were the promises? We read of three in the verses I will focus upon this afternoon, verses 20-33 of chapter 23. The first is simple. A promise and blessing of divine guidance.

#### **A. God will guide and guard his people as he leads them to their inheritance.**

It was personal guidance, personal in the form of an angel.  
v.20

Notice all the elements of that promise. The angel was sent, “a minister of God's providence, employed in conducting and protecting the camp of Israel,” as Matthew Henry comments. “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.”

Some even suppose this angel “to be the Son of God, the angel of the covenant,” a pre-incarnate appearance of Jesus himself. That interpretation is at least a possibility. But even if not, this was a very personal commitment on God’s part. In verse 23, we read about “my angel.” And in verse 21, “My name is in him.”

Setting aside the question of whether or not it a specific reference to Jesus, it is certainly a reference to God’s own leadership. This is what makes God, God. This is what distinguishes our God from the false gods of then and now, that he is personally, faithfully involved in the lives of his people. This is what distinguishes the God whom we worship from mere fate or mere determinism. This is what is different about God than the false god of Islam called Allah.

v.20

To guard you. To keep you. To protect you. That’s what the angel does. That’s what God does. That’s the promise.

And he keeps us “on the way.” He brings us to the place he has prepared. Don’t miss the great encouragement of those words, for it is an encouragement that you can have today. Wherever you are going. Whatever the path of your life might be. Whatever difficulties or obstacles might lie in your path. God keeps us “on the way.”

In verse 23 we read that he “goes before you.” Thus he has prepared that way for you! Just think about that. God has gone ahead of you, so to speak, and prepared the path upon which you walk. God has established that pathway for you. And what does he call us to do?

2 Cor. 5:7 “...for we walk by faith, not by sight.”

This is what it means to walk by faith. To believe that God has the path already prepared for you. It is to believe that He has gone before you, ahead of you, and turns back to you in order to say, “Come, follow me.”

And he has the final destination prepared for you as well. The inheritance. For Israel of the Old Testament, that meant the land. The land of “the Amorites and the Hittites and the Perizzites and the Canaanites, the Hivites and the Jebusites” according to verse 23. We read in verse 30, they will “possess the land.” So I use the word “inheritance” to describe that land because that is the word God uses. To possess the land meant to gain it as an inheritance. It is how Moses describes the land in his great song of praise to God in,

Ex. 15:17 “You will bring them in and plant them In the mountain of Your inheritance, In the place, O LORD, which You have made For Your own dwelling, The sanctuary, O LORD, which Your hands have established. 18 "The LORD shall reign forever and ever.”

And,

**B. God will give his people a delightful inheritance.**

It’s a great land. But more than that, look at,

v.25-26

How delightful! In other places this land is described as flowing with milk and honey. And this land, this inheritance, is the very thing in the history of Israel as a nation that is used as the

image for our own eternal inheritance as Christians. So I want to take this promise made to Israel and lift it out of the Old Testament context and give that promise to all of you who belong to Jesus Christ. This delightful inheritance is ours in Christ.

Peter writes,

1 Peter 1:3 “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! According to his great mercy, he has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, 4 to an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you.”

That’s the inheritance. The land of heaven. The land of the new heavens and the new earth. Beloved, the land is ours. And it is a delightful land.

Rev. 21:1 “Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. 2 And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. 3 And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. 4 He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away.”...7 The one who conquers will have this heritage, and I will be his God and he will be my son.”

That’s our delightful inheritance, and that’s the application of this text in Exodus 23. Not merely a history lesson of an old, ancient country. But a promise to be fulfilled by God in the church of Jesus Christ. So we read of Jesus Christ that,

Heb. 9:15 “...he is the mediator of a new covenant, so that those who are called may receive the promised eternal

inheritance, since a death has occurred that redeems them from the transgressions committed under the first covenant.”

There is a third promise here in Exodus 23. God will guard and guide his people. He will give them a delightful inheritance. And, he will give them victory.

### **C. God will give his people complete victory over his enemies.**

In the Old Testament history of Israel, that meant a military victory over the nations of that land.

v.22-23

Likewise,  
v.27-31

Again, let me emphasize. The significance of that promise was not focused merely upon the triumphs of Israel under the leadership of Joshua, but all of it points to the triumph of Jesus.

And what is the nature of that triumph?

Phil. 2:9 “Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, 10 so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, 11 and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.”

That is a triumph that shall be seen in the church, the body of Christ, for Jesus declares,

Mat. 16:18 “I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.”

Or how about this song of praise,

Rev. 19:6 “Then I heard what seemed to be the voice of a

great multitude, like the roar of many waters and like the sound of mighty peals of thunder, crying out, “Hallelujah! For the Lord our God the Almighty reigns. 7 Let us rejoice and exult and give him the glory, for the marriage of the Lamb has come, and his Bride has made herself ready.”

So this is the confidence we gain by reading the Old Testament history of Israel. This victory shall be ours, in Christ. This victory belongs to the church as the body of Christ. And that is our great encouragement. That is also our great motivation for obeying the law. For,

## **II. THE PROMISED BLESSINGS OF GOD ARE THE CONTEXT FOR THE CALL TO OBEDIENCE.**

That’s what is so often missed. This call to walk in submission to God’s law is in this context of covenant promises of blessing. This is the nation of God’s people, receiving the great promises of God himself. And with the giving of those promises,

### **A. God’s people are warned against rebelliousness.**

The angel will lead you, God says to his people.  
v.21

There is a conditional statement regarding the promised blessings, for if the people rebelled, they wouldn’t receive the blessings themselves. They were called upon to demonstrate the true reality of their identity with their submissive obedience.

v.22

That warning is still real. It doesn’t contradict the theological definitions of the doctrine of salvation, it doesn’t deny that you can attain a confident assurance of salvation, but it does warn against the outward carelessness of rebelling against God.

The warning is similar to what we find in,

Heb. 6:4 “For it is impossible to restore again to repentance those who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, and have shared in the Holy Spirit, 5 and have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the age to come, 6 if they then fall away, since they are crucifying once again the Son of God to their own harm and holding him up to contempt. 7 For land that has drunk the rain that often falls on it, and produces a crop useful to those for whose sake it is cultivated, receives a blessing from God. 8 But if it bears thorns and thistles, it is worthless and near to being cursed, and its end is to be burned. 9 Though we speak in this way, yet in your case, beloved, we feel sure of better things—things that belong to salvation.”

Such a great balance. The great encouragement of salvation--better things. But still with the warning against rebelliousness. To put the same warning more concisely, we have Paul’s words,

Rom. 6:1 “What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound? 2 By no means! How can we who died to sin still live in it?”

So the warning abides. With the positive instructions.

### **B. God’s people are instructed in how they are to love God.**

Here are the commands. Here is how you define submission and how you explain what it means to be rebellious. Will you obey God’s laws and commands or not? Will you love God and show your love with your obedience, or will you rebel against him?

There are laws for sexual purity, beginning in chapter 22 verse

16. There are laws requiring mercy and compassion to travelers and sojourners, verses 21-27. There are laws about truthfulness, beginning in chapter 23, verses 1 through 3. And protecting private property, verses 4-5. Then laws regarding the exercise of civil governments and courts, verse 6-9. Finally, there are sabbath laws for the land as well as for the people, verse 10-12.

All of those are simply civil applications of case law fleshing out the moral requirements of the ten commandments. As I said a couple weeks ago, those civil laws themselves, the case laws, have expired with the end of the nation of Israel. But the general principles embodied in those laws abides.

But all of that said, let me keep my emphasis of today, which is not so much to expound each and every one of those laws, but to recognize what they are. They are the definition of love. They are the expressions of love. They are the practice of love.

Love for God is not simply something you feel. Love for God is not merely an experience you have within your own subjective consciousness. Love for God is very, very practical. And very well defined.

1 John 5:3 “For this is the love of God, that we keep his commandments. And [don’t forget] his commandments are not burdensome.”

There is one overriding concern in all of these laws, one concern in the mind of God which is the basis for each of these requirements of the law. It is still God’s overriding concern for the practical rules of living given to his people. The concern is holiness. Our holiness. Or, to put it another way, our separation from the world. Our ability to live differently from the world, set apart from the world. And set apart to God.

That’s what all the laws intend to demonstrate, and in the Old Testament, that is the particular value of all the ceremonial laws. Outward patterns by which God’s people showed themselves to be God’s people.

Specifically,

**C. God’s people must completely separate themselves from the false gods of the world.**

And that is what holiness is all about. Being different. So we must not worship the gods of this world. Just as the Israelites were not to worship the gods of the nations in their promised land.  
v.13

Similarly,  
v.32-33

That’s what sin really is--making a covenant with a false god. And John summarizes pretty clearly for us what those gods of our day really are,

1 John 2:15 “Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. 16 For all that is in the world—the desires of the flesh and the desires of the eyes and pride in possessions—is not from the Father but is from the world.”

What are the gods whom you serve whenever you sin? The lust of the flesh. The lust of the eyes. And the pride of life. And what does Moses say? “You shall make no covenant with them and their gods... lest they make you sin against me.”

2 Cor. 6:17 “Therefore go out from their midst, and be separate from them, says the Lord, and touch no unclean thing; then I will welcome you, 18 and I will be a father to you, and you shall be sons and daughters to me, says the Lord Almighty.”

Notice again how the blessings attach to the consistent and faithfulness submission to the requirements of the law. By faith in Jesus Christ, you are sons and daughters to God. You are adopted as his children as the great object of his own eternal purpose, according to his grace and not as a reward for anything that you have done or might do. It's all of grace.

Eph. 1:4 "In love 5 he predestined us for adoption through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will, 6 to the praise of his glorious grace, with which he has blessed us in the Beloved."

So you whom he has predestined for adoption through Jesus Christ, you who have trusted in Jesus Christ for your salvation and who cry out to God, Abba Father, show yourselves to be his children by separating yourselves from the false gods of the world.

And show yourself to be his beloved children by worshiping him faithfully. Indeed,

### **III. THE PROMISED BLESSINGS OF GOD ARE THE CONTEXT FOR THE CALL TO WORSHIP GOD.**

v.25

You can't claim to be the object of God's grace and the recipient of his promised blessings if, at the same time, you refuse to come out and serve him. But, on the other hand, to put it positively, if you would show yourself to be a worshiper of God, then you will know and experience the fullness of these spiritual blessings which he has promised you in Christ Jesus.

So it is clear that,

#### **A. God's people must learn to reject the false worship of false gods.**

Not only shall you separate from those idols, but you must also refrain from imitating their worship. So what does God say to Israel?

22:20

He takes it pretty seriously, doesn't he?

23:24

That is such a consistent exhortation throughout these books of preparation for the people of God to receive their inherited land. It is such a needed and necessary warning even in our own day.

Deut. 12:28 "Be careful to obey all these words that I command you, that it may go well with you and with your children after you forever, when you do what is good and right in the sight of the Lord your God. 29 "When the Lord your God cuts off before you the nations whom you go in to dispossess, and you dispossess them and dwell in their land, 30 take care that you be not ensnared to follow them, after they have been destroyed before you, and that you do not inquire about their gods, saying, 'How did these nations serve their gods?—that I also may do the same.' 31 You shall not worship the Lord your God in that way, for every abominable thing that the Lord hates they have done for their gods."

How we worship is so very important to God, for it is the height of our expression of love to him. And so,

#### **B. God's people must learn to worship the true God rightly.**

Not just the negative--avoiding the false worship of the false gods. But the positive.

Here is what was required in the Old Testament,  
v.14-19

Now, we have a great advantage in the New Covenant. No longer is the place of God's presence to which we must go to offer our sacrifices of worship an earthly building or temple. No longer do we have to wait for those three special feasts. No longer do we have to offer our sacrifices through the intercession of a human priest. And no longer do we offer up sacrifices of blood.

All of that is done away with, but all that it represents abides as it points us to the final and completed work of Jesus Christ. Speaking about those Old Testament ceremonial regulations for worship, the writer of Hebrews comments,

Heb. 9:8 "By this the Holy Spirit indicates that the way into the holy places is not yet opened as long as the first section is still standing 9 (which is symbolic for the present age). According to this arrangement, gifts and sacrifices are offered that cannot perfect the conscience of the worshiper, 10 but deal only with food and drink and various washings, regulations for the body imposed until the time of reformation. 11 But when Christ appeared as a high priest of the good things that have come, then through the greater and more perfect tent (not made with hands, that is, not of this creation) 12 he entered once for all into the holy places, not by means of the blood of goats and calves but by means of his own blood, thus securing an eternal redemption."

Heb. 9:24 "For Christ has entered, not into holy places made with hands, which are copies of the true things, but into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God on our behalf. 25 Nor was it to offer himself repeatedly, as the high priest enters the holy places every year with blood not his own, 26 for then he would have had to suffer repeatedly since the foundation of the world. But as it is, he has appeared once for all at the end of the

ages to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself."

And how does that help us learn how to worship the true God rightly today?

Heb. 10:19 "Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus, 20 by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain, that is, through his flesh, 21 and since we have a great priest over the house of God, 22 let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. 23 Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful. 24 And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, 25 not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near."

And so the blessings of God are ours, we who worship God in spirit and in truth,

John 4:23 "...for the Father is seeking such people to worship him. 24 God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth."

So with the encouragement of God's promised blessings, let us be those worshipers whom God is seeking for his own glory.