

Exodus 20:22 – 24:11

Introduction

Today, we are turning our attention to Exodus 20:22 through 24:11. In these verses we will see the covenant introduced, the heart of worship emphasized, and the pattern for justice established, which is how we are to care for and love one another.

At this point, the Israelites—the descendants of Abraham—have grown into a vast nation, numbering perhaps two to three million men, women, and children. God is now shaping them into a nation, and every nation needs structure. They'll have their own culture, their own system of worship, and yes—their own set of laws.

When we hear the word law, we often think of limits or rules meant to keep us in line. But that's not how God's law works. He didn't give it to control His people; He gave it to draw them close.

I learned that personally as a teenager. I was a Christian, I had a relationship with the Lord, but there were seasons when my life didn't reflect it. I remember worrying at times, in the misery of my sin, "What if I were to die like this? What troubled me most wasn't fear of punishment—it was the thought of being forever distant from God. Even in my prodigal state, my loving Father was drawing me back to Himself.

God's law isn't about condemnation. It reveals His heart—what He loves, what He values, and how He calls us into relationship with Him and with one another.

So today, as we walk through these chapters, we'll see that God's law isn't cold or distant. It's filled with His justice, His mercy, and His purpose—and it all ultimately points us to Jesus.

Before we begin, let's step back and see where we're headed. In the next few sections, we'll see how God starts shaping His people through a covenant—a binding relationship with Him. We'll begin with the Covenant itself, then move to the Command against Idolatry, and the Case Laws that show what God's justice looks like in daily life. After that, we'll look at the Sanctions—God's blessings for obedience and His warnings for disobedience. Then, we'll come to the Ratification, the moment when the covenant is formally confirmed and sealed in blood. And as we close, we'll consider how we are to live as new covenant people.

The Covenant (Legal Arrangement)

Now that we have the lay of the land, let's begin with the first major section—the Covenant itself. Where there are laws, there are also legal documents—and that's exactly what we find here. This portion of Exodus describes a legal arrangement between God and His people—a covenant. In fact, Exodus 24:7 calls it "*The Book of the Covenant*." It's written much like a legal contract: it begins with an opening statement that sets the tone, defines the relationship, and outlines the responsibilities on both sides.

Let's look at how it begins. God speaks directly to Moses from Mount Sinai and says in Exodus 20:22, "*Thus you shall say to the people of Israel: 'You have seen for yourselves that I have talked with you from heaven.'*" With these words, God sets the tone for everything that follows. God alone establishes the covenant between Himself and His people. His authority is absolute—and yet it is marked by grace.

The very fact that God speaks to Israel reveals that His grace—not their merit—is the foundation for their obedience. History reminds us that God had already chosen

Israel as His people, redeemed them from slavery, and set His love upon them. The law, therefore, was never intended as a way for them—or for us—to earn salvation through perfect obedience. It was a guide for how God’s people were to live in relationship with Him and with one another.

The Command Against Idolatry (Context)

In verse 23, God gives the context for the covenant, *“You shall not make gods of silver to be with me, nor shall you make for yourselves gods of gold.”* In this verse, the Lord repeats His command not to make or worship images, especially idols of silver or gold. These kinds of idols were commonly found in households in the ancient world. People believed they could bring protection or prosperity. By forbidding them, God is reminding His people that He is not a god of silver or gold, not something crafted by human hands or confined to human imagination.

This ties directly back to the first and second commandments, *“You shall have no other gods before Me... You shall not make for yourself an idol.”* You see, worshiping God on His terms is at the very heart of this covenant. It’s about placing Him in His rightful place—on the throne of our hearts. And friends, that hasn’t changed. The idols may look different today—success, comfort, approval, relationships, possessions—but the temptation is the same: to replace God with something else when God is the only one who can truly satisfy. Last year, when we were studying the story of the woman at the well, I shared my Jesus replacements of trying to meet my own needs with things, and even people. What competes for God’s rightful place in your heart?

In verse 24, God establishes an altar for meeting with Him, promising to come to them and bless them. A temporary system until the “Lamb of God,” Jesus, comes to

take away the sins of the world, as spoken by John the Baptist, in John 1:29. Jesus is the perfect and ultimate sacrifice. His death and resurrection, made a way for the forgiveness of all sins, eliminating the need for further animal sacrifices. Romans 10:4 expresses it well, *“For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes.”*

Case Law: God’s Justice in Everyday Life

Verse 24, also begins a long section that spells out the laws or ordinances of the covenant—the detailed instructions for how Israel was to worship (love God), live, and treat one another (love others) as a holy nation.

Many scholars describe this as the practical outworking of the Ten Commandments. They were the foundation, and this section applies them to daily life. The goal is that our lives would reflect God’s character—living in a way that pleases Him and showing responsible, loving care for those around us. There are principles to be uncovered here that still hold true today.

This portion of Scripture is what is called case law. It gives specific examples and explains the judgments for breaking them. In essence, this section provides examples—precedents—to guide justice in Israelite society.

It’s also important to remember that many of these laws were given with Israel’s future life in Canaan in mind. For example, the command not to boil a young goat in its mother’s milk directly opposed a Canaanite fertility practice, reinforcing Israel’s loyalty to the one true God.

As we continue through a sampling of these laws, we’ll see how they reflect God’s deep concern for righteousness and justice. Now let’s turn our attention to a

simple example in Exodus 21:33-34, “33 *When a man opens a pit, or when a man digs a pit and does not cover it, and an ox or a donkey falls into it, 34 the owner of the pit shall make restoration. He shall give money to its owner, and the dead beast shall be his.*” This is *case law*—a practical example that illustrates a larger principle: If your actions cause harm, you take responsibility and make it right. God cares about how His people treat one another. He is not distant but involved in the ordinary concerns of daily life.

Let’s take a moment to consider one of the most challenging sections—God’s laws about slavery in Exodus 21. At first glance, this passage can be uncomfortable to read. In his commentary, James Bruckner writes, “God regulated—rather than prohibited—the practice of slavery so the laws would work in the context of the ancient world. Taking slavery as a cultural norm, these laws began a gradual trajectory toward limited freedom and protection for slaves.” He also reminds us that freedom from slavery is a primary context of the book of Exodus. Even here, we see a God deeply concerned with justice and human worth.

Interestingly, Motyer, in his commentary, explains that the Hebrew language has no word for slavery, only for servanthood. There are two kinds of servitude described in Scripture:

The first was forced slavery. This is the tragic kind we think of—when people were captured or sold against their will, like Joseph was by his brothers or like Israel in Egypt. Further down in Exodus 21, in verse 16, it states, “*Whoever steals a man and sells him, and anyone found in possession of him, shall be put to death.* As you can see in this verse, as well as others, the Bible *describes* this kind of slavery as evil and never

condones it. God repeatedly condemns oppression and calls His people to remember how they were treated in Egypt so they will never treat others the same way.

Bond Service was the second kind of slavery or servitude, and oftentimes it was voluntary. A person in debt could work for another family to repay what they owed. This was closer to an employment agreement. The servant received food, shelter, and payment until their debt was cleared. Even here, God placed boundaries. Exodus 21:2, states, *“If you buy a Hebrew servant, he shall serve six years, and in the seventh he shall go out free.”* This verse means that if a Hebrew became a servant—either to pay off a debt or because a court ordered it—they had to be set free in the seventh year without paying anything. This rule made sure no one stayed in slavery forever.

Now consider what could happen when the relationship was shaped by mutual care and respect. Exodus 21:5-6, *“If the servant plainly says, ‘I love my master, my wife, and my children; I will not go out free, then his master shall bring him to God, and he shall bring him to the door or the doorpost. And his master shall bore (or pierce) his ear through with an awl, and he shall be his slave forever.”* This image carries right into the New Testament. Paul, Peter, James, and Jude, all call themselves *bondservants of Christ*. They’re saying, *“I’m not serving Jesus because I have to; I serve Him because I love Him.”*

The New Testament’s take on slavery can be found in 1 Corinthians 7:21-24, Pastor Anthony preached on this passage not too long ago. One of the things it says is for those who were slaves when called to faith in the Lord, that they are considered “freed persons of the Lord,” and their spiritual identity is in Christ. The passage also advises that while one should not be troubled by their earthly status, they should take

the opportunity to gain freedom if possible. Ultimately, the message is to not become slaves to human beings, but to remain slaves to Christ...so when it comes to slavery, freedom is clearly stated as the ideal.

Now let's turn our attention to another case—one of the prescribed judgments that can be difficult for us to think about. It's also a passage that clearly shows that God values life, both inside and outside the womb. We find it in Exodus 21:22–25, *“When men strive together and hit a pregnant woman, so that her children come out, but there is no harm, the one who hit her shall surely be fined, as the woman's husband shall impose on him, and he shall pay as the judges determine. But if there is harm, then you shall pay life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, burn for burn, wound for wound, stripe for stripe.”*

This passage establishes the principle of just retribution—punishment fitting the offense. As Motyer notes, “an eye for an eye” is often misunderstood as harsh or savage, but it is actually a poetic and dramatic way of insisting that the penalty must match the crime.

The penalty “life for life,” however, can be hard for many of us to grapple with. That is why it is comforting to remember that earlier in this same chapter, in verse 13, God also provided the concept of *cities of refuge*. These were places where someone who unintentionally caused another person's death could flee and be spared from immediate execution. Even within these strict laws, God made space for mercy and protection.

In our own day, there are still consequences for our actions, but Christ has made a far better way to care for our hearts in the midst of these realities. Hebrews 6:18,

teaches that God has given both His promise and His oath, and because He cannot lie, we have a firm and unshakable hope in Him. The verse draws on the imagery of fleeing to a place of refuge—echoing those ancient cities. But now, through Christ, God Himself is our refuge. We run to Him for safety, mercy, and strength, knowing He receives us with compassion. In Him, our hearts find the encouragement and security we need in the midst of difficult circumstances.

When we place our faith in Jesus, giving Him authority and residence in our lives, we can confess our sins, and our loving Father is faithful and just to forgive us and cleanse us from all unrighteousness (1 John 1:9). In the Old Testament, they fled to cities of refuge; today, we have direct access to God Himself—our refuge, our safe place. He stands with open arms, inviting us to come to Him for forgiveness, comfort, and peace. *What is weighing on your heart today? Be encouraged. Turn to your loving Father—and perhaps a trusted sister in the Lord—to help carry your burdens and care for your heart.*

The Sanctions: Blessings and Warnings

As we continue through these covenant instructions, God now turns from legal principles to the consequences tied to them. This brings us to the sanctions—His blessings for obedience and His warnings for disobedience. Exodus 23:20 says, *“Behold, I send an angel before you to guard you on the way and to bring you to the place that I have prepared.”* This isn’t just any angel. God says, “My name is in Him.” Most scholars understand this as the pre-incarnate Christ—the Son of God appearing before His birth in Bethlehem.

God promises His people protection and victory, but He also calls for their obedience. Verse 22, *“If you carefully obey his voice... I will be an enemy to your enemies.”* There is a clear pattern here: obedience first, then blessing follows. I would also like to add that the attitude of our hearts in our obedience also matters to God. Jesus shared some sobering words about the scribes and Pharisees in Matthew 23:27, calling them whitewashed tombs—beautiful on the outside, but full of uncleanness within. God calls us to a better obedience. Jesus said in John 14:15, “If you love me, you will keep my commandments.” This is obedience that flows out of a loving relationship with our Lord.

Now comes the warnings, starting in verse 21, *“Do not rebel against him, for he will not pardon your transgression.”* And again in verse 33: *“If you serve the gods of the nations around you, they will become a snare to you.”* God knows the human heart. He knows that when we chase after idols—whether ancient gods or modern distractions—we end up trapped by them.

The Ratification of the Covenant (formal approval)

We have covered a lot of territory thus far and our journey has finally brought us to the Ratification of the Covenant. But before we walk through Exodus 24: 1-11, we need to picture the scene that is unfolding before the people of Israel. For several chapters now—beginning with the Ten Commandments in Exodus 20 and followed by the case laws of chapters 21 through 23—the Lord has been speaking His covenant words. But it’s easy to lose sight of where all of this is happening. Israel is camped at the base of Mount Sinai, the mountain of the Lord. And the glory of God has descended on the mountain in overwhelming power. The ground trembles. Thunder rumbles

through the air. Lightning cracks across the sky and a dense cloud of divine glory envelops the peak. It is the most awe-inspiring, fear-inducing display imaginable, and into this terrifying holiness, God invites the elders of Israel to come partway up the mountain.

Step 1: The People Agree to God's Covenant

But before the elders can approach, several crucial things must happen. Verse 3 tells us Moses relayed *“all the words of the Lord and all the rules”* to the people—everything from the Ten Commandments to the laws that applied them to daily life. And the people respond together, with one voice, *“All the words that the Lord has spoken, we will do.”* They enter the covenant willingly, publicly, and wholeheartedly.

Step 2: The Covenant Is Written Down

Verse 4 records Moses writing down all the words of the Lord. This is the first place in the Bible where God's people create a written record of His revelation.

Step 3: The Covenant Is Sealed in Blood

Before the elders can ascend, sacrifices are made. Moses builds an altar and twelve stone pillars—one for each tribe. The people offer burnt offerings and peace offerings. Burnt offerings signify atonement—sin transferred to a substitute, the wrath of God falling on another in our place. Peace offerings signify fellowship—God not only forgiving sin, but welcoming His people into His presence.

Moses collects the blood, dividing it into two basins. Half is thrown against the altar—representing God's side of the covenant. The other half is sprinkled on the people—representing their participation in the covenant. It's difficult for us to grasp today, but for them it was an unforgettable moment—one that surely marked them for

life. Then Moses declares: “Behold the blood of the covenant that the Lord has made with you.” The covenant is sealed. God and His people are bound together in a solemn, sacred union.

A Meal in God’s Presence

At the end of our text, Moses, Aaron, Nadab, Abihu and the seventy elders went up the mountain partway and had a feast and saw God's glory. The ESV study bible points out “the elders' ability to “behold God” and not perish is a remarkable concession. Their shared meal in God's presence signifies the new covenant relationship and peaceful communion established through the blood sacrifice.”

Conclusion – How do we live as New Covenant People

As we close, let’s remember that God’s law reveals His character—His holiness, His justice, and His deep concern for how His people live. Yet it also exposes our need, because we cannot keep it perfectly. In the weeks ahead, we’ll explore the tabernacle and the sacrificial system—God’s gracious provision for His people in the Old Testament.

During my preparation for this talk, I came across a striking quote from Tim Keller, “Every act of mercy in the Old Testament was purchased in full by Christ. There would be no covenant with Abraham, no covenant with Moses, and no new covenant at all—if Jesus did not come to bear the guilt of His people.” Scripture confirms this truth. In Romans 3:24–26, Paul explains that God forgave sins before the cross because Christ’s blood would one day be shed. In His forbearance, God “passed over former sins,” knowing that Jesus would fully pay the cost. God is both just and the justifier of those who trust in Him.

Amazingly, God has always dealt with sin through the same sacrifice—the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. So how do we live as forgiven, redeemed, new covenant people? Through Jesus, we now enjoy an intimate relationship with our heavenly Father. The law of the covenant is no longer written on tablets of stone, but on our hearts, and we are called to live lives shaped by faith and repentance.

Through faith, we are united to Christ, and through ongoing repentance, we walk in His freedom. This is not about perfection, but daily turning from sin by God’s grace and the Spirit’s power. Repentance is not meant to produce shame, but freedom and newness of life. As God’s covenant people, may we walk daily in faith and repentance—turning from sin, resting in grace, and finding refuge in Christ. Let me share a brief personal example.

A Personal Example of Covenant Living

Recently, I failed to follow through on something important—others were depending on me. Overwhelmed and distracted, I put it off. In time, God brought clarity, and I sensed the Spirit nudging me to take responsibility.

I repented by owning my failure before God and those involved—no excuses. It was humbling, but freeing. My repentance was met with God’s mercy and forgiveness. He came near and quieted my heart with His love, as Zephaniah 3:17 reminds us.

This is the heart of our covenant with God: when we turn to Him, He comes near with compassion and reclaims His rightful place in our hearts. So I invite you to walk this path of ongoing faith and repentance with me, as we journey together in Christ.