

Laws for Rest and Remembrance

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[0 : 00] Well, if you've been with us for the last few weeks, then you would have known and seen that we've been going deep into God's laws here in the Old Testament. So I think what I might do is just start off by recapping so that we can maintain our bearings.

So if you recall, first I've encouraged us not to see these laws as irrelevant or to simply think we just obey the Ten Commandments and that's it. Rather, the God who gave us these laws is still the same and these laws reflect who he is.

Holy, gracious, compassionate, just. However, even though they are still relevant, we need to take care how we apply them.

One reason for this is because we now live in the shadow of the cross. I've got a recap slide on the screen there. Jesus' death and resurrection changes everything.

We no longer keep the law to maintain relationship with God. Rather, we are forgiven because of what Jesus has done. God graciously allows us to come to him through the sacrifice of his son's death for us.

[1 : 13] Since Jesus fulfilled the law for us, we no longer have to keep it to be in relationship with God. Further, and this is point two, the laws were also given to Israel as an earthly nation.

But as Christians, we belong to Christ's spiritual kingdom. He doesn't have a temporal government or judges or law enforcement agencies. On the other hand, we still remain as citizens of an earthly country like Australia.

It's a secular society. People of many faiths belong to it. And so while the principles underlying God's laws are excellent, we can't simply impose them on our society, especially those laws that require grace and generosity.

We could, however, think about applying them as a church, since we have been redeemed by Christ. And yet, even here, the church isn't exactly like Israel.

We're not a nation. We don't have borders. We don't need law and order and enforcement agencies. And so to apply them, we need to adapt the underlying principles of the law to our context.

[2 : 28] And yet, it's still important to do so. It's not optional in that sense, because we want to live our lives to reflect God's character. So tonight, we'll look at the remaining laws in this section, and we'll try and do the same thing, apply the principles to our context.

Many of the laws you'll see tonight will be similar to the ones that we've seen earlier, so we won't spend too much time on them. Indeed, if you look at them carefully, all these laws, these specific ones, many of them are elaborations of what is already in the Ten Commandments.

Well, I don't have a lot of jokes tonight, so I thought I might start with a pointless comic relief. So on the slide there, if you remember last week, we had the principle of an eye for an eye.

Well, this is a Larson cartoon with Bozo the Clown. He's in prison because he's thrown too many pies in the face, and the sheriff is pleading to the town not to throw a pie for a pie.

All right. I can't hear whether you laughed or not. I hope you did. But let's get back to God's Word, which is more important. Chapter 22, verse 16. It says, If a man seduces a virgin who is not pledged to be married and sleeps with her, he must pay the bride price, and she shall be his wife.

[3 : 48] If her father absolutely refuses to give her to him, he must still pay the bride price for virgins. Do not allow a sorceress to live. Anyone who has sexual relations with an animal is to be put to death.

Whoever sacrifices to any other god, then the Lord must be destroyed. Do not mistreat or oppress a foreigner, for you were foreigners in Egypt. Do not take advantage of the widow or the fatherless.

If you do and they cry out to me, I will hear their cry. My anger will be aroused, and I will kill you with the sword. Your wives will become widows and your children fatherless.

If you lend money to one of my people among you who is needy, do not treat it like a business deal. Charge no interest. If you take your neighbor's cloak as a pledge, return it by sunset, because that cloak is the only covering your neighbor has.

What else can they sleep in? When they cry out to me, I will hear, for I am compassionate. Do not blaspheme God or curse the ruler of your people. Do not hold back offerings from your granaries or your vats.

[4 : 55] You must give me the firstborn of your sons. Do the same with your cattle and your sheep. Let them stay with their mothers for seven days, but give them to me on the eighth day. You are to be my holy people.

So do not eat the meat of an animal torn by wild beasts. Throw it to the dogs. Now, there's quite a few things in there. But I think on hindsight, first of all, the law in verses 16 and 17 probably belongs to last week.

It's about just compensation, where the father loses the bride price for his daughter because she's been seduced by a man. And so in this case, the seducer has to pay even if the father refuses to give her in marriage.

So I think like the others before this, the aim of this law is to try and sort out a disagreement, a loss created by one person taking advantage of another.

Now, how it applies today, I'm not quite sure. Maybe it's a lesson for all you young suitors out there to make sure you ask the father before you propose to your sweetheart.

[6 : 02] But as for the rest of the laws, they seem a little haphazard at first, but I think there's a structure here of sorts. It's not entirely neat or tidy, so I could be wrong.

But here's how I think it's been arranged. So you've got a slide there of the structure. So if you go back all the way to the beginning of last week, straight after the Ten Commandments, we had laws about true and false worship.

Then laws protecting one group of vulnerable people, slaves, in chapter 21, verse 1 to 11. Then we had crimes, all of which were punishable by death.

And then this long section, which were laws about compensating for injury and loss, the so-called eye for an eye section. It goes all the way from 21, verse 18, until here, in chapter 22, verse 17.

And then from verses 18 to 20, we again have laws which are all punishable by death. They are serious crimes. Some are similar to the ones in the first list.

[7 : 08] Then in verse 21, we have more laws protecting the vulnerable. So this time, the foreigners, widows, the fatherless, and the poor. And then in verse 26, we have laws related to offerings.

So in other words, laws about true and false worship again. So in one sense, the laws sort of start and end with worship.

And perhaps that's subtly trying to reinforce to us that all the laws, whether they're explicitly about sacrifices and worshipping at the altar or not, are actually acts of worship to God.

Observing them is Israel's way of pleasing and honouring Him through their lives. And then it's kept off right at the end here in verse 31 with the reminder to be God's holy people.

So much so that even what they eat is an act of worship. Hence, the defiled animal meat, which has been torn by wild beasts, is to be cast off to the dogs.

[8 : 10] So the point here, I think, is that they are to be a holy people. These laws help them to be holy. Now, why is God calling them to that?

Well, because God has rescued them. He set them apart. Remember in Exodus chapter 19, He's carried them on eagles' wings. With what purpose?

Well, to be a holy nation. A kingdom of priests, as it says on the slide. This means they are set apart to be different from the other nations. And here in these laws, we have a reminder of that.

So, in particular, they are reminded that they are not to be like Egypt, where they were mistreated. These laws help them to be different to how they were treated in Egypt.

So, we have that reminder in verse 21. And then later again, which we'll get into, chapter 23 in verse 9, which says, Do not oppress a foreigner.

[9 : 06] You yourselves know how it feels to be foreigners. Because you were foreigners in Egypt. Now, nowadays, if you travel as a tourist to another country, there's no oppression.

In fact, they welcome tourists. But back in those days, if you were not one of the people, then you did not have many rights. Likewise, verse 30 is another reminder of Egypt, isn't it?

There, during the Passover, God spared Israel's firstborn. And in return, they were to consecrate their firstborn sons to him, along with the cattle and the sheep.

But I think here, in these laws, we see a subtle shift. Because I think we see now that the laws are meant to also be observed collectively. They weren't just called to be holy individuals.

They were called to be a holy nation together. And so, while each of them had to observe the laws themselves, they also needed to do it together. And so, as we move on to chapter 23 and verse 1, notice how these laws actually require people to do this together, in order for the laws to be kept fully.

[10 : 17] Do not spread false reports, it says, verse 1. Do not help a guilty person by being a malicious witness. Do not follow the crowd in doing wrong.

And when you give testimony in a lawsuit, do not pervert justice by siding with the crowd. And do not show favoritism to a poor person in a lawsuit. If you come across your enemy's ox or donkey wandering off, be sure to return it.

If you see the donkey of someone who hates you fallen down under its load, do not leave it there. Be sure you help them with it. Do not deny justice to your poor people in their lawsuits.

Have nothing to do with a false charge. And do not put an innocent or honest person to death. For I will not acquit the guilty. Do not accept a bribe. For a bribe blinds those who see and twist the words of the innocent.

Can you see there that there's a sense in which the whole community needs to commit to these laws. It sets the tone for everyone else. The individuals that are within it. So, for example, false reports and rumors take many to spread, don't they?

[11 : 23] A mob rule like we've seen with panic buying recently only takes hold if people collectively succumb to that fear. And if you work for companies or part of organization, it's the culture of a place that often predominates, doesn't it?

If there's corruption and the leaders turn a blind eye to it, then before you know it, even those who don't want to do it, give in because the culture takes over. But if you start work at a place and you see people looking out for each other, helping each other, then you too will feel safe, wouldn't you, to stick your neck out for others, to go the extra mile for them.

Because you know that then you wouldn't be taken advantage of as well. And that's how we should be like at church, shouldn't we? Our collective culture helps us to each obey God's laws.

If our culture is to serve others, then it's easier individually for each of us to do it, isn't it? If our culture is gracious and forgiving, if we assume the best of one another and not badmouth others, then it infects others to do the same, doesn't it?

Culture is important. It helps each of us individually to make it easier for us to obey God. But note here too that God says that if Israel fails to obey Him, then He Himself is not going to stand idly by.

[12 : 55] He's a righteous judge and He will see to it that justice is done. So if Israel fails to act and they mistreat the widows and orphans say, then He says in verse 22 and 27 of chapter 22, He will hear their cry and come to their aid, wouldn't He?

Likewise, here in verse 6 of chapter 23, He will not acquit the guilty. Now, I find that these are really comforting words, aren't they?

For those who feel oppressed or for the poor. Because it gives them hope that even if no human is going to come to their rescue, then God would and He will.

And of course, we see that exactly in what Jesus did when He came to earth, didn't He? He routinely ate with the social outcasts. He exposed the hypocrisy of the powerful.

Well, those of us that feel powerless today, well, we tend to look to powerful people, don't we?

[14 : 04] To protect us. But God is saying, God's Word is encouraging us actually to look to Him instead. So if that's you and you feel like you're being hard done by, taken advantage of, then take heart at God's Word.

He will hear our cries because He's compassionate. Even though we don't know how or when He might act, He will act.

And so our encouragement is to persevere in doing what's right. Not to give in to evil just because we think that no one's going to come to our rescue. Because God will vindicate us one day, even if we have to wait till the end of time.

Now the remaining two sections are likewise, I think, focused on the community. But here I think instead of righting wrongs, God here is mandating positive patterns of communal life.

So verses 10 to 13 relate to the Sabbath. And we've already talked quite at length about it when we looked at the Ten Commandments. But here I think we have a few more details.

[15 : 10] So verse 10. Here I think God is seeing Israel as stewards of His creation.

So on top of the six days and then the rest on the seventh day, God also commands them to rest in God's land every seven years. It involves not just them resting, but resting the land as well.

And as I said a few weeks ago, this is really an act of trust, isn't it? For God to provide in that seventh year. But here we see also that it's an act of generosity, isn't it?

To the poor who don't have their own land. And this year they are to allow them to gather what's left in the land. So too for the wild animals. That's the extent of God's generosity that He would even think about the wild animals.

Similarly, Israel is only to work six days a week. But again, we see that this is now a law for the entire community. It's not just the rich and the powerful that get to rest.

[16 : 44] No, they need to provide for rest for everyone else as well. Slaves, foreigners, even their oxen and donkey. And again, this is a stark contrast, isn't it?

To their time in Egypt, when their masters failed to give them any rest. So let's consider how this principle could apply today.

We probably can't do it literally. Resting the land in the seventh year. Maybe my wife can rest her veggie plot in the seventh year. I don't know. And I'm not even sure if the farmers still do it.

But again, the principle here is that of generosity, isn't it? And I have to say, I am so encouraged to see that many of us here, many of you actually, are indeed very generous.

The food collection boxes at the door for the needy are always regularly filled up. That's the similar principle, isn't it? As you go shopping, you pick up a few things extra in order to leave them for those who need it.

[17 : 45] Likewise, during the pandemic, as we've set up this benevolent fund, we've seen many people contribute to it. So thank you for practicing this principle of generosity.

Now, of course, we should also apply the principle of rest. We talked a few weeks ago about this already. But perhaps here, with the added verses, maybe we should think about ensuring that others have rest as well.

So here are a few examples. Perhaps when the social restrictions are lifted, maybe offer to babysit someone, someone's children, so that the parents can have a few hours each week to themselves to rest.

Or perhaps take a meal over to them so that maybe once or twice a week they can rest from having to cook dinners. I'm sure you can think of other examples, but there are ways on there for us helping others so that they get the time off just as we have.

Well, on to the final section in verses 13 to 19. And here, God provides three festivals to help them remember that God is their savior and provider.

[18 : 56] So first, in verse 13, I think there's a general command to worship rightly. Be careful to do everything I have said to you. Do not invoke the names of other gods. Do not let them be heard on your lips.

But then following, God instructs them to gather three times a year to honor him. So he says, three times a year you are to celebrate a festival to me. The first is the unleavened bread.

Festival of the unleavened bread. If you go back to Exodus 12, it's the same festival as the Passover. So it says, celebrate the festival of unleavened bread. For seven days eat bread made without yeast, as I commanded you.

Do this at the appointed time in the month of Aviv. For in that month you came out of Egypt. No one is to appear before me empty-handed. The second is to be celebrated at the start of the harvest section.

So the next verse, celebrate the festival of harvest with the first fruits of the crops you sow in your field. The third is at the end of the harvest.

[20 : 01] Celebrate the festival of ingathering at the end of the year when you gather in your crops from the field. And then you can see that this section closes off here because the instruction there is again to gather three times a year, repeated.

Three times a year, all the men are to appear before the sovereign Lord. Now I think it says the men, not because the women aren't allowed to come, but probably because only the men are expected to do so.

Perhaps it was impractical for women to be making those journeys, so many journeys each year. And then finally we have in the rest of the verses, I think there's somewhat of a footnote to these festivals as to what they are allowed or not allowed to do.

So it says, Do not offer the blood of a sacrifice to me along with anything containing yeast. That's for the unleavened bread. The fat of my festival offerings must not be kept until morning. Bring the breast of the first fruits of your soil to the house of the Lord your God.

That's probably the second festival. And then, Do not cook a young goat in its mother's milk. Now, nobody really knows exactly why you shouldn't cook a kid in its mother's milk.

[21 : 14] Although the practice sounds a bit sad anyway. Poor kid. But again, I think generally, without going into the detail, the principle here is that God is saying that there is a right way and a wrong way to worship Him.

The manner of bringing sacrifices and offerings to Him. Now, why did God require these festivals? Well, it's so that Israel would remember Him.

With the unleavened bread, it was to remember Him as their Savior. But with the other two, time at important parts of the harvest, it's to remember that God was their provider.

God even tells them not to come empty-handed. Because that was a tangible acknowledgement, wasn't it? That they recognized God as their Savior and provider. And so, I think these are good practices for us as a church too, the principle of it.

We need habits as a church, individually, to remember God as Savior and provider. Sure, we can do it individually, but I think there's something significant, isn't it, when we come together and we do it collectively, together, as God says, His holy people.

[22 : 29] So, we may not have three big festivals a year, but each Sunday, we gather to remember these things, don't we? As we pray, we remember that God is our Savior and provider through His Son, Jesus.

As we read His Word, we are reminded again. Each month, when we celebrate the Lord's Supper, we do the same thing, don't we? And again, for big festivals, like Easter and Christmas, that is a time for us to again, remind ourselves, that God is our Savior and provider, through Jesus.

Now, here at HTD, we even have our own annual Thanksgiving Sunday, don't we? In October. And I think it's a great idea. I didn't come up with it, so I'm not claiming credit.

It started way before my time. But it's a chance to express our thanks to God as provider. It even coincides with tax return time. So, you know, it's sort of, we can bring a portion of our tax return, can't we?

To Him. Now, you may think that us pastors are only doing this to force you to give more. But actually, we're just trying to establish habits of Thanksgiving in your lives, in our lives.

[23 : 43] Not empty-handed or empty-mouth praise, but tangible ways of expressing thanks. Now, what's the reason for that? Well, because otherwise, it's so easy to fall into thinking that we've done it ourselves, isn't it?

We forget exactly who our provider is, who our Savior is. And when we forget God in the good times, then we end up being anxious in the bad times, don't we?

But when we learn to be thankful in the good times, then we're trained, aren't we? To trust in God. And then to be contented and trusting of Him, even when times may be bad.

Well, friends, God is gracious. He was gracious when He gave the laws to Israel. It helped them to understand who God is, that He was a righteous judge, a gracious Savior, and a generous provider.

And He has given us His laws as well, His entire Word of God. And so when we apply the principles of these laws in particular, we help one another to see what God is truly like.

[24 : 59] We help others who are not yet Christians to see what God is truly like. And then we can remind ourselves constantly who He is and what He's done for us.

Well, let's pray. Father, Father, thank you for your laws and give us a love for them because in them, we see who you are. And in keeping them, we learn how to love you and become like you.

Teach us to obey them, not from a sense of duty and self-righteousness, but from a thankful and grateful heart for all that you've done for us in Christ Jesus. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.