

March 8

Scriptures: Read Exodus 21 & 22

Key Verse: “And you shall be holy men to Me.” (Exodus 22:31a)

Overview

After the Lord had given the moral law it was expounded upon by the civil law to make it applicable to the Israelites' everyday life. This was intended to produce a peaceful, well-working, and holy society. The God-given original law code was for Israel to have strict guidelines to follow and thereby maintain a high level of morality (to promote righteousness before God) within their society; a witness to the surrounding nations that they were the people of God.

Slavery was an integral institution throughout the whole world at that time. However, slavery among the Israelites showed a marked distinction; unlike the other nations, they gave their rights to their slaves. Women also were given rights and lifted up to a higher standing by these rulings. A man in poverty might be forced to sell his daughter into servanthood, but the laws assured him that she would be taken care of and her rights were strictly regarded. In general, the rulings stressed the sanctity of human life. In most cases, capital punishment was carried out on whoever took a life. If one caused an accidental death, God provided a place of refuge so no revenge could be taken (21:13; cf. Numbers 35:6). God also provided rights and protection for unborn babies. If one caused injury to a pregnant woman and she miscarried, then that person must pay the penalty of death, “life for life” (21:22, 23). This teaches that abortion was rightly a capital offense!

The penalties may seem harsh to us, but in that ancient culture there were no law enforcement officers or prisons, nor the fuller, final and complete revelation of God in Jesus Christ, our example. For them to understand the seriousness of a crime, the punishment served as the only way to curb wrong behavior. In this cultural context the laws were very thorough, fair and just. If the laws were followed, this expressed righteous behavior before God. He, however, knows the hearts, and knows if acts are done out of a pure motive which is real righteousness.

The laws express man's responsibility toward his fellowman to whom he must show respect. If anyone's rights were violated there must be restitution and recompense. Guilt by carelessness which causes harm to another, even if it be his animal, is still punishable. To do wrong to a neighbor is to sin against God. The seduction we read of here is concerning the loss of value because of the dowry (the moral crime is dealt with in Deuteronomy 22:22-29). The sin of witchcraft within the covenant people was punishable by death, as was the unspeakable sin of bestiality. Anyone found sacrificing unto any other god but the Lord was also condemned; these three sins were practiced in the heathen religions of surrounding nations, and Israel was to take no part in them.

Humanitarian laws were also enforced. God's care and protection of the foreigner, needy widow and orphan among Israel are consistently expressed throughout Scripture (cf. James 1:27). He hears the cry of those in need, and if they are mistreated, His wrath is stirred up (22:21-24; cf. Deut. 10:28, 19). Also, in care and protection of the poor among the covenant people, those who lent money to them were warned against making their burdens heavier by charging interest, but were instead instructed to do it out of the goodness of their heart; as well as returning a pledge of their cloak which they would use as a covering on the cold nights. All people must be treated with dignity and respect.

The first fruits and livestock were to be the Lord's, and the first-born males were to be dedicated to Him as priests (22:29; cf. Exodus 13:2). All the terms of the covenant stressed the Israelites' responsibility and reverence to the Lord, not only in what they did, but in abstaining from what He forbade.

The fact that these laws deal with matters of immorality indicate the sinful condition of the Israelites, which the Apostle Paul says the Law could not overcome (Romans 8:3). But through God's own first-born Son, “the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us who do not walk according to the flesh but according to the Spirit”. (Romans 8:4) This then leads to “life and peace” (Romans 8:6) and a holy and righteous walk before God

Prayer

O Holy God, You've not only made provision for our forgiveness, You've written Your laws upon our hearts. Help us to surrender daily in obedience to You.