

July 8

Scriptures: Read Deuteronomy 21 & 22

Key Verse: “If a man has committed a sin... and you hang him on a tree, ... he who is hanged is accursed of God.” (Deuteronomy 21:22-23)

Overview

In these chapters, we are reminded that the civil and criminal laws of Israel, no matter how trivial they seem, are still the commands of God and therefore must be respected. Many laws have to do with being compassionate and humane to God’s creatures (22:6-7); having love and concern for the welfare of one’s neighbor, including respect for his property (22:1-4); and using caution to ensure the safety of children and others, such as making a small wall around the flat-roofed homes that none might fall off while upon it, bringing guilt upon the home-owner. The roofs were always in use (as they are still today in the Middle East) for entertaining guests, drying clothes, growing herbs and vegetables, etc. Just as God is concerned for the well being of others, so must we.

The principle behind the laws was to ensure the stability, orderliness, and purity of Israel as the chosen and holy nation of the Lord. Their separation and submission to God was even reflected in their dress, such as the tassels around their outer garments (22:12) and the important distinction between the appearance of men and women (22:5). Then there was the command to keep certain things separated (e.g., an ox was not to be harnessed with an unclean donkey, 22:10); this possibly symbolized the separation Israel was to have with anything unclean.

The sixth commandment teaches the sanctity of life; “You shall not murder” (Ex.20:13). Here Moses gave Israel the regulations concerning an unknown murderer. To show the seriousness and sinfulness of such an offense, a ceremonial execution was performed upon a substitutionary heifer. The washing of hands over the slain heifer signified that the inhabitants of the town were innocent. This ritual would then result in keeping the peace, for it would prevent the blood-avenger from seeking vengeance upon the town’s people. This ritual prefigured the vicarious execution of Jesus for the blood-guiltiness and defilement of His people.

Moses continued his discourse to stress the necessity of purity and the sanctity of marital relationships. If an Israelite man desired a captive woman (from outside of Canaan) for wife, she was to undergo a thirty-day period of ceremonial purification before the marriage (21:12; cf. Lev.14:8). This signified the removal of her captive status and her receiving the rights of an Israelite. She was to be treated honorable and, if not desired, she was to be set free.

Both men and women of Israel were to be chaste and pure. The seventh commandment, forbidding adultery, was to be upheld. There were strict laws and severe penalties for any breach of chastity, for the distinctive and holy people of God were to have higher morals than the surrounding nations. Moses reviewed some of these regulations so Israel would remember them when they began their new life in Canaan.

Moses also dealt with family relationships, such as the law concerning the right of the first-born son to receive the double portion of the inheritance, regardless of the father's preference. Polygamy was tolerated (like divorce, this was allowed because of the hardness of men's hearts); therefore, a situation such as Moses described was probably common. In this matter, god's supreme authority upheld the son's rights and limited the father's authority, that none would suffer and be deprived of their God-given position and dignity. However, God ordained parental authority as representative of His own. The fifth commandment (Ex.20:12) was to be obeyed and taken just as seriously as all the others. To dishonor and curse one's parents was equal to blasphemy. Parental authority was the foundation of a solid society. A disobedient, rebellious, and incorrigible son brought great shame and dishonor to his family and even to the whole covenant family of God. For persistent rebellion and wicked defiance there was no other choice but to stone him: "so you shall put away the evil person from among you" (21:21).

Moses described a very serious penalty for sin against God—to be sentenced to death and hung upon a tree as a form of public disgrace and shame, serving as an example for others of the wages of sin. This method signified that the accused was accursed of God and was suffering divine judgment and rejection. Moses spoke these words with the foreknowledge of God, for this prophetically pictured the type of death the Messiah was to endure willingly in bearing our sins and becoming a curse for us (see Gal.3:13; see also John 19:28-40).

Prayer

O God, You have revealed Yourself in the Bible and we know You are an intensely Holy God. Your word tells us that you hate sin. Your word also tells us that Your only begotten Son was hung on a tree suffering terrible shame, taking upon Himself the wages of sin which is death. Help us to live accordingly. Amen!