

NOTES AND QUESTIONS FOR INDIVIDUAL OR GROUP STUDY IN THE BOOK OF EXODUS –

PART SIX – THE PLAN FOR SOCIETY

In the last study we explored the contract between God and His people which would be the basis of the relationship which He wanted with them. It would require a covenant, a commitment, from both sides and it would have consequences, summarised as the Ten Commandments. These would be the chapter headings for the detail which would follow in Exodus, Leviticus and Deuteronomy. In this detail there would be many examples of principles in action in society. Those principles in the end came down to two. 'Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength', the first four commandments, and 'love your neighbour as yourself', the remaining six.(Mark 12:30,31; Deut.6:5; Lev.19:18) Loving God is about receiving only from a God who gives without limit. Loving our neighbour begins with not taking from him or her, and then giving as we pass on what we have received from God.

The fundamental concept in applying love for our neighbour to society is justice or fairness. In general people will work out the terms of the relationship between them justly, provided they are equal in strength of body and character, social position, financial resources and intellect. If there is inequality there is a likelihood of injustice. The law therefore needs to be about protection of the weak. Over the next three chapters,(21-23) there are many examples of protection.

Slaves were to be protected from lifelong exploitation.(21:1-11) They would only remain slaves for 6 years unless they chose to become bond-slaves because they loved their masters, foreshadowing the New Testament idea of being a bond-slave of Jesus Christ.(Rom.1:1) Girls who were sold to be slave/wives were to be protected by being given the full position of a normal wife. Slaves who were displeasing could be redeemed presumably by their families. By redemption they were protected from abuse. We have been redeemed by the death of Jesus on the cross. In general today it is the unskilled and poorly paid who need protection which bosses who love the Lord will gladly give.(Col.4:1)

The victim of crime, whether violence physically or verbally needed protection so there was a specific penalty which normally meant that the offender would suffer the same loss as the victim.(21:12-36) At the same time the offender also needed protection from excessive retribution. The motive should be considered as well as the injury. Animals which harmed the public were the responsibility of the owner. Negligence that led to harm to others also needed to be protected against. Even the unborn were to be protected against abortion. Notice that there were no prisons. Justice in the modern day tends either to neglect the victim or brutalise the offender.

Private property was to be protected, particularly the little which belonged to the poor.(22:1-5) Trustees were held responsible for what was entrusted to them.(22:6-15) Virgins were to be protected not just against rape but seduction by those inclined later to discard them. Fathers were responsible to protect their daughters against abuse.(22:16,17) The importance of protecting people from witchcraft, bestiality and idolatry was demonstrated by the severity of the penalty.(22:18-20) The needy, whether strangers, widows or orphans, were to be protected. Those whose poverty led them into debt were not to be exploited.(22:21-27) Order was to be maintained but above all God's worship was to be protected.(22:28-30) The final instruction in this chapter was to avoid a health hazard.(22:31)

Justice in society must be based on truth, so truth needed to be protected. False evidence is based on either malice or money. Good lawyers are expensive so again it was particularly the poor who needed to be protected.(23:1-9) Since the land was their inheritance, it too needed to be protected from greed by sound farming practices, as workers also needed to be protected from exploitation. Both needed to be rested for one in seven, years or days.(23:10-12) The purpose of a day of rest was as a time to learn more of the God who protected His people. One effective way to do this was through the symbolism of the three annual feasts, each of which taught them an aspect of salvation. Those times needed to be protected.(23:13-19) Life for the Israelites was to be primarily about a relationship with God expressed not in rules but in a constant sense of His presence and His guidance through every step of the way from Egypt to Canaan by the pillar of cloud and fire. Life for us is to be guided by God's presence in us as His Spirit with a plan for every detail of our lives.(23:20-22) To occupy the land of Canaan those who had taken over the land God gave to Abraham had to be removed. God would do this if His people trusted Him wholeheartedly without compromising with other religions or philosophies. He promised to protect them from the enemies who would try to rob them of God's promised best but they would need to protect their choice to follow Him only.(23:23-33)

In summary the needy who were to be protected by the law included – slaves, girls, the low paid, victims of crime, even the offenders, victims of dangerous animals, those harmed by negligence, unborn children,(21) property owners particularly those with little, those who trusted others with their possessions, virgins, those led astray into witchcraft, bestiality and idolatry, the poor - particularly strangers, widows and orphans, those in debt, worshippers, victims of health hazards,(22) givers of false evidence, the land being overused, workers on the land, opportunities for spiritual life, and false teachers.(23)

SOME QUESTIONS FOR FURTHER STUDY

1. How did the instructions God gave serve to protect the weak in that society? Who are the weakest in our present day society in our own country and worldwide? How would following the same principles as described here protect them? Why is the law of our country alone inadequate to achieve this?(chapter 21)
2. What further examples of protection of the weak are given in this chapter? Again what are modern examples of the same needs? How would the principles used here for punishment and rehabilitation work by comparison with our modern methods? What once more is the secret of making these principles work?(chapter 22)
3. What extra examples of protection are in this next chapter? How do these principles relate to modern concerns for the environment? What teaching process is necessary if a society is to take on the heart of God's plan? What outcome could the Israelites expect if they followed God in this way? What can we expect?(chapter 23)