

Loyalty to God

Exodus 23:20-33

By [Dr. J. Ligon Duncan](#)

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If you have your Bibles, please open to Exodus chapter 23, beginning at verse 20, hear the word of God:

Behold, I am going to send an angel before you to guard you along the way and to bring you into the place which I have prepared. "Be on your guard before him and obey his voice; do not be rebellious toward him, for he will not pardon your transgression, since My name is in him. "But if you truly obey his voice and do all that I say, then I will be an enemy to your enemies and an adversary to your adversaries. For My angel will go before you and bring you in to the land of the Amorites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Canaanites, the Hivites and the Jebusites; and I will completely destroy them. You shall not worship their gods, nor serve them, nor do according to their deeds; but you shall utterly overthrow them and break their sacred pillars in pieces. But you shall serve the LORD your God, and He will bless your bread and your water; and I will remove sickness from your midst. There shall be no one miscarrying or barren in your land; I will fulfill the number of your days. I will send My terror ahead of you, and throw into confusion all the people among whom you come, and I will make all your enemies turn their backs to you. and the Hittites before you. I will not drive them out before you in a single year, that the land may not become desolate and the beasts of the field become too numerous for you. I will drive them out before you little by little, until you become fruitful and take possession of the land.

I will fix your boundary from the Red Sea to the sea of the Philistines, and from the wilderness to the River Euphrates; for I will deliver the inhabitants of the land into your hand, and you will drive them out before you. You shall make no covenant with them or with their gods. They shall not live in your land, because they will make you sin against Me; for if you serve their gods, it will surely be a snare to you.

Amen. This is God's Word. May He add His blessing to it. Let's pray.

Our Father, we thank you for Your word and we ask that You would teach us

from it. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Here we have before us a promise, a command, another promise and another command. But the focus of the whole section is that we would honor God, that we would glorify God, that we would be loyal to God, and that we would be obedient to His commands, and in that obedience that we would find blessing. And you'll appreciate why this message is so important. In less than ten chapters, Israel with the word of God from Mount Sinai still ringing in their ears, while they're still encamped within the plain of Sinai will violate every command in this passage. She'll go after other gods, she'll make a golden calf; she'll follow the detestable ritual practices of the Canaanites in the very presence of God in Sinai. So it is vital that God give this reiterative warning to Israel at the very end of this covenant that He is making with them. I want you to see three or four things which still speak to us.

I. God will finish what He starts but He expects obedience from His people.

First, if you'll look at verses 20-23, you'll see God's promise and provision of His angel to guide and bring Israel into the land of promise. We learned something from this section. We learned that God *will* finish what He starts. God doesn't start a project and then forget about it; He doesn't start a project and leave it undone. He will finish what He starts. But He expects obedience from His people. In verse 20 God reiterates His commitment to Israel by assuring them of His supernatural intervention on His part. He says, "I'm going to send an angel to guard you along the way and to bring you into the place which I have prepared." He has been promising to bring His people into the place which He prepared for them ever since He called Abraham out of the Ur of the Chaldees. Every since Genesis 12:1-3, He's been promising to bring His people into the place which He has prepared for them. And in fact, He promised Abraham that His children would sojourn in Egypt and then be brought back to the place which God had prepared for Him. And all along the way in the wilderness, God has been promising to bring His children, His people, into the land and into the place He has prepared for them. Here He reminds them that He will give them a supernatural guide into the land. "I am going to send an angel before you to guard you along the way."

Now, if you haven't been paying close attention to Exodus, you may be scratching your head real quickly and saying, "Wait a minute—an angel—I don't remember this." Well, it's been a little while, but the angel has been there before. The first time in the Book of Exodus that an angel shows up is at the burning bush. In Exodus 2:3, the angel of the Lord appears to Moses himself in a blazing fire from the midst of the bush. The next time that an angel shows up is in Exodus 14:19 as the pilgrimage across the wilderness begins and God says, "The angel of God who had been going before the camp moved and went behind them, and the pillar of cloud moved from before them and stood behind them."

And so, it's not just that this pillar of fire and pillar of cloud are guiding Israel by day and night; it's the angel of God there as well. And that angel's presence is reiterated in Exodus 23 not once, but twice, in verse 20 and then again in verse 23. In verse 20 he is called an angel, but in verse 23 he is called my angel. "My angel will go before you and bring you into the land." This is not the last time that the angel will appear. Significantly, the angel will reappear in Exodus 32 and 33. Don't forget that. In Exodus 32:34 we will read, "Behold, my angel shall go before you." In Exodus 33:2, "I will send an angel before you and I will drive out the Canaanite."

But I won't spoil the significance of those passages for you. The point is that God had supernaturally been guiding His people and now He is reminding them again of that and saying, "I'm going to complete the task which I promised. I'm going to bring you into the land through the intervention of My angel." You see, that angel's presence is reflective of and an extension of the Lord's own presence. The New Testament writers are not hesitant at all to identify the angel of the Lord with a pre-incarnate manifestation of our Lord Jesus Christ. The point is this: God is in your midst. I am with you. My own angel is with you; I am with you. I'm going to complete the project that I've begun. God doesn't get into the middle of a project and give up; He follows through. That is why Paul could say, "I know whom I have believed and I am convinced that He is able to guard what I have entrusted to Him against that day."

If you go to the city of Edinburgh, on the hill on the northeast side of town, Calton Hill, you'll see a monument to the Napoleonic veterans. It's supposed to be a replica of the Parthenon. But if you've ever seen a picture of the Parthenon or the ruins of the Parthenon itself, you will notice as you look at this monument in Edinburgh that it is only half there. That's because the Scots got halfway into the building of it and they ran out of money, and they *certainly* weren't going to build it on faith. They never completed it; it's half done. They got into the project but they couldn't complete it. There are monuments like that all over the world. People start them; they don't count the cost, they never finish them. God is saying here, I'm not going to get into the middle of a project and not bring it to completion.

Now that is vitally important for you to remember when you do get to Exodus 32 and 33. God is telling you here now of His purposes to complete that which He has begun. And so, when you get to Exodus 32 and 33, and the people of God rebel against Him and He says to Moses, "OK, that's it; I'm done with them. I'm going to bring you into the land of Canaan and make you a great nation." You need to remember God's prior commitments to understand what is going on there. God is not changing His mind when He gets to Exodus 32 and 33, and He's tipping you off to that right here in Exodus chapter 23. The strong language of verse 22, the strong language of conditionality, "*If* you obey; *if* you do all I say--*then* I will be an enemy to your enemies."

This strong language of conditionality helpfully emphasizes the requirements of the covenant. Obedience is not an option for Israel. And in light of what Israel is about to do in just a few chapters, this is all the more poignant. Verse 23 recollects the promise of God to Abram in verses 16-21. "My angel will go before you and bring you into the land of the Amorites and the Hittites and the Perizzites and the Canaanites and the Hivites and the Jebusites." It's just what God had promised to Abraham. I want you to understand that the destruction of these people here is not some sort of a tyrannical, amoral, genocidal action by a satanic deity. It is a moral visitation of judgment against sin. God said that to Abraham 550 years before it happened, "the iniquity of the Amorite is not yet complete." That's why I haven't yet brought judgment. I'm waiting for the Amorites to repent. *Now*, however, judgment is coming--550 years later. Don't tell me that God is not a patient God. He waits 550 years before the judgment and then the judgment comes. This is not some sort of a capricious, arbitrary, mean-spirited, small-minded action of a vindictive deity. This is the moral judicial and penal judgment of God against sin.

But you see that this whole passage is a warning to the people of God. He expects obedience from them. "If God is for us, then who can be against us," Paul asks. But you can turn that around. If God is against us, then who can be for us? And if we are against Him while declaring that we are *for* Him, then how we can expect other than for Him to bring judgment against us as traitors and hypocrites. That's why He can say in verse 21, "Be on your guard before him and obey His voice; do not defy Him; do not be rebellious toward Him, for He will not pardon your transgression...." If you rebel against the angel of the Lord, if you reject the presence of the Lord, if you turn your back on the God of your salvation, can you but expect judgment? That's the warning of this passage. That's the first thing I want you to see.

II. God expects an absolute uncompromising loyalty to Himself in our obedience to the first command.

The second thing is this; look at verse 24. Obedience to the first commandment requires the rejection of the gods of the Canaanites, *and* of the way of worship of the Canaanites. In verse 24 we learn that God expects an absolute, uncompromising loyalty to Himself in our obedience to the first command.

There are four directions given in verse 24. First: There is to be no participation in the religious worship of the Canaanites gods. "You shall not worship their gods." Second: There is to be no following after the religion of the Canaanite gods. "You shall not worship them nor serve them." Third: There is to be no emulation of their worship practices nor do according to their deeds. Fourth: Canaanite worship sites are to be obliterated. You shall utterly overthrow them and break their sacred pillars in pieces." You see, this is another one of those passages that teaches us that the Exodus was all about God's glory. The Exodus

is all about bringing into being a people who will glorify God and syncretism doesn't glorify God. Mixing loyalty to the one true God and to false gods doesn't glorify God, and so God wants everything wiped out that would detract from His glory. And at the very heart of covenant loyalty to God is our commitment to worship Him and worship Him alone. And not only are we to worship Him alone, we are to worship Him as He commands and not according to the way of the nations around us. This is the absolute uncompromising loyalty that God is calling for and again it is precisely that which will be violated in Exodus chapter 32. Its mind boggling, isn't it? It's almost like they went through this passage and said, "OK now, what have we forgotten? Which command have we not violated yet." Step by step they go through this passage and ignore its warnings and ignore its demands.

III. Faithfulness to God's covenant means blessings for God's people.

Third. If you look at verses 25-31, you will see a very important theme in the five books of Moses; the theme of the connection between obedience and blessing. The obedience blessing principle is set forth here in Exodus 23:25-31, and it simply teaches us that faithfulness to God's covenant means blessing for God's people. And we learn several things here. In verses 25-27, we simply learn this. Obedience is good for you. You remember Satan had tempted Eve to believe that obedience was bad for her. Do you mean to tell me that He told you that you couldn't eat from any of the trees? Now, never mind that that is not what God said. The point of that statement by Satan was to cause Eve to begin to doubt in her heart whether God's commands were good or good for her. Here in verses 25-27, God is simply reiterating that My commands are not like the commands of an arbitrary tyrant which serve only his interests; My commands will serve your interests.

Look at what He says. "Obey and this is what will happen. I'll feed you, I'll make you healthy, I'll prevent miscarriage, I'll give you long life, and I will scare your enemies to death." And He doesn't stop. In verses 28-31, He says, "You obey and not only will I defeat your enemies, but I'll do it in the best possible way for you. If I wiped them all out now there wouldn't be enough of you to go into the land and possess it and you'd have lions and tigers and bears everywhere. So I'm going to wipe them out little by little so you can go in and inhabit the place. So I'm not only going to defeat your enemies but I'm going to defeat them in the best possible way for you."

And it is vital for us to see that this passage is not about the health and wealth gospel. This is precisely the kind of passage that health and wealth teachers go to and say, "See, you obey God and you get blessing. You obey God and everything will be great in your life." This is a passage about loyalty to God and about the goodness of God's will and about the blessing of obedience and about the particular situation in redemptive history that Israel found herself in. Soon

Israel was going to violate all of these directives. And God is warning her now, and He is reminding her of the blessing of obedience and the curse of disobedience. Trust and obey for there's no other way to be happy in Jesus but to trust and obey. You could have summed up the passage just like that.

IV. God expects an exclusive covenant loyalty to Him and no human relationship must detract from it.

And there is one last thing in verses 32 and 33. God again demands exclusive covenant loyalty from His people. "You shall make no covenant with them or with their gods." God expects and exclusive covenant loyalty to Him and no human relationship must detract from it. In verse 32, in addition to the directions that He had given Israel in verse 24, Israel is here forbidden to enter into a covenant relationship with the occupants of the land. They are not only not to worship their gods, they are not only not to use the way of worship that the Canaanites used, they are not only to refuse to engage in the cultic practices of the Canaanites, they are not only to tear down the sanctuaries of the Canaanites; they are not to make treaties or agreements with the occupants of the land. That's going to be significant later too. In Joshua 9, somebody is going to realize that Israel didn't break that particular command in Exodus 32, and they're going to say, "Oops! We missed that one; we need to go ahead and break that one quickly too." You see, all of these things set up things that are going to happen on the way into the land. All of these commands of God look into the future and speak to the situations that Israel will face on its way into the land. The reason for this command is plainly stated in verse 33. "They shall not live in your land because they will make you sin against Me. And if you serve their gods it will surely be a snare to you."

And doesn't that speak to us today of how human relationships can still be a snare to the people of God? A young Christian woman falling in love with a pagan; she loves him, he loves her. They serve different Gods. She consigns herself to a life of misery. He is a snare to her because she made a covenant with someone who did not love the Lord, her God. And we could repeat that story in 5,000 variations. The commands of God are still applicable today to the people of God. May God grant that we would be loyal to Him. Let us pray.

Our Lord and our God, we ask now that You would, by Your Spirit, search our hearts out. Reveal to us those places where we have been disloyal to You; those places where we have put the gods of our invention ahead of the Creator, the Redeemer, the providential Lord. Oh Lord, we would not be petty idolaters, but followers of, disciples of the living God through Jesus Christ our Lord. So help us we pray to recognize Satan's devices and to resist the temptation to compromise our commitment to You, to resist the allurements of the world or the call of political correctness or tolerance, to compromise our unyielding loyalty to the one true God. Lead us not into temptation; deliver us from this evil and grant that we

would always hallow Your name. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.

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