

EXODUS 23:20-33: GOD'S PROTECTION PLAN

SERMON-ALIGNMENT CURRICULUM

by Kevin McGill

Obedience in the Fog of War

In the last few weeks, we've seen that God's law flows from love, strengthens community, restores justice, and keeps Him first in our worship. But here's the challenge: It's easy to obey in peacetime. When life is calm—career steady, relationships peaceful, no looming crises—God's commands feel natural. But in wartime—when your job's on the line, your marriage is in conflict, or you face loss—it's tempting to bend the rules. We rationalize: "Victory is what matters. Survival first." Yet God says the opposite: "If you walk in my statutes and keep my commandments... I will give peace in the land" (Leviticus 26:3–6). Victory comes through obedience, not compromise.

I learned this at one of my first jobs in college. I was a telemarketer for a small tech firm that scanned paper into PDFs—a big deal in 1998. One salesman left for a competitor, and my boss feared that secrets would be stolen. He asked me about paying an inside informant for information. I warned him it would backfire (Proverbs 10:9). He ignored me. The informant kept raising his price and eventually threatened to expose my boss's spying—blackmail. What seemed like a shortcut became a trap (Proverbs 11:3).

That's what happens when we break God's laws to "win." Instead of security, we invite disaster. God warned Israel in Exodus 23: they would face enemies and hardship, but His presence would go before them if they obeyed. Abandoning His ways would be like driving off a cliff.

Group Discussion Questions:

Have you or someone you know broken the rules because you were fighting against something, and thought you needed to do everything to win? What was that experience like? What was the outcome?

I. The Assurance of God's Protection (vv. 20–22)

Imagine a safe, narrow path. On that path, God's protection covers you. Step off, and danger waits. The problem? We can't see the path. We're spiritually blind (2 Corinthians 4:4). That's why the Spirit whispers—reminding us, "Do not slander, do not steal, forgive one another" (Ephesians 4:31–32).

If we obey, we walk safely. If we say, "I'll handle it my way," we drift toward destruction. Life may still bring pain on the path, but stepping away leads to deeper, often unbearable brokenness. Parents understand this. You tell your child, "Don't do that," and they think you're ruining their fun. In truth, you're shielding them from harm they can't see. God's commands work the same way—boundaries meant for protection, not punishment (Deuteronomy 10:12–13). God says: "Stay close to the one I've sent. Follow My way, and I will protect you." The Spirit sees what you can't. Trust His voice, obey His commands, and remain under His shelter (Proverbs 3:5–6).

Group Discussion Questions:

1. How have you experienced God's "safe path" in your own life?

Read Proverbs 3:5–6 and Deuteronomy 10:12–13. What are some ways God's commands have acted like protective boundaries for you—even if they didn't make sense at the time?

2. What makes it hard to trust God's guidance when you can't see the path ahead?

II. The Risk of God's Protection (vv. 23–24)

God's plan for Israel was clear: He would defeat their enemies; they were to destroy their enemies' gods. In other words—God handles the battle, we deal with the idols.

Today, our enemies aren't Amorites or Jebusites. They are often more subtle—loneliness, fear, inferiority. And each enemy has a "god" (a power) that gives it control over us. Loneliness may tempt us toward unhealthy relationships or casual hookups. Inferiority may drive us into one-upmanship—chasing status through possessions, homes, cars, or achievements.

God says: I will handle the loneliness. You overthrow the god that fuels it. For Israel, that meant marching to a village's high place, taking the idol that represented its power, and publicly throwing it down—a visible, risky act (Deuteronomy 12:2–3). For us, it might mean deleting a contact, blocking a number, refusing to upgrade just to keep up appearances, or rejecting debt-fueled competition.

This isn't just about self-denial. It's about breaking the spiritual power behind the struggle. When you overthrow an idol, you declare that your trust is in God alone (Psalm 115:4–11). Will people notice? Yes. Will some mock you? Absolutely. But obedience to God's command brings freedom from the grip of these false gods.

Group Discussion Questions:

1. What "idols" or false sources of security might be hiding behind your biggest struggles?
2. Why do you think God asks us to deal with the idols while He handles the enemies?

Consider how Matthew 6:24 and 1 John 5:21 connect to this idea. What does this division of responsibility reveal about God's role in our battles and our role in our spiritual growth?

III. The Reward of God's Protection (vv. 25–28)

1. Temporary Rewards – For Israel, God promised provision (bread and water), health, fruitfulness, and long life. But these were given to a specific people in a specific moment of history—a dispensation (Exodus 23:25–26). God's grace is expressed differently across eras: Adam to Noah, Noah to Moses, Moses to Christ, and now the church age. For the Israelites—freshly freed slaves—these blessings were God's way of restoring dignity and hope (Deuteronomy 8:4). These promises do not guarantee that every

believer today will be free from sickness or hardship. We must understand them in their historical context to avoid disappointment or disillusionment.

2. **Eternal Rewards** – God also promised: “I will send my terror before you... I will make all your enemies turn their backs to you... I will send hornets before you” (Exodus 23:27–28). This represents His ongoing spiritual protection. While temporary blessings may differ, God’s eternal protection remains for all who follow Him. Enemies—whether loneliness, fear, or inferiority—are chased away in His timing. Sometimes the relief lasts a lifetime, sometimes only hours, but His presence ensures we are never alone in the battle (Psalm 91:1–4; 2 Thessalonians 3:3).

Group Discussion Questions:

1. **How does understanding the difference between temporary and eternal rewards change the way you trust God?**

Read Exodus 23:25–28 and Deuteronomy 8:4. How can recognizing the historical context of certain promises protect you from disappointment while still deepening your hope in God’s faithfulness?

2. **When have you experienced God “chasing away” an enemy in your life?**

Consider Psalm 91:1–4 and 2 Thessalonians 3:3

IV. The Pace of God’s Protection (vv. 29–33)

God’s protection is certain—but not immediate.

Why? Because rapid victory without maturity can lead to ruin. Israel had been enslaved for 400 years and would wander 40 more. They weren’t ready to manage an entire land. If God cleared it overnight, wild animals—or new enemies—would overtake them. His slower pace was mercy, giving them time to grow strong enough to keep what He gave (Deuteronomy 7:22).

This is the process of sanctification—maturing in faith so we can thrive in the season God has prepared. Strength comes as we walk with Him, trust His timing, and obey His voice. Each step, He drives out enemies while we overthrow the “gods” behind them. Over time, we grow in faith, patience, and reliance on Him (James 1:2–4).

But waiting is hard when the enemy is at the door:

- “My boss says I have one month to fix this.”
- “My spouse won’t return my calls.”
- “I’ve been on campus for a year and have no close friends.”

We want instant rescue. God says: “Trust Me. I see what you can’t. I am preparing you for a future you’re not ready to hold yet.” Like a good Father, He knows the dangers ahead and will not lead us into a season we cannot sustain.

Group Discussion Questions:

1. Why do you think God sometimes chooses to work “little by little” instead of giving immediate victory?

Read Deuteronomy 7:22 and James 1:2–4. How might His slower pace be protecting you or preparing you for something greater?

2. How can you stay faithful during seasons when God’s timing feels too slow?