

20. Exodus 21:1-14

(6/15/16)

Laws Regarding Slaves

Before we get into this section let me talk about the Bible and slavery for a minute.

There are those who blame the Bible and in particular the law of Moses for slavery—however slavery existed long before the Bible, Israel or Moses.

Spurgeon (and many others) said, *“Moses did not institute slavery in any shape; the laws concerning it were made on purpose to repress it, to confine it within very narrow bounds, and ultimately to put an end to it.”*

We must remember that, even though God accepted slavery as a part of ancient cultures, He made sure His people never practiced it the way pagan cultures did.

It’s interesting that, the first thing God did as He was giving them His law to govern their personal and national lives, was to remind them of their own slavery down in Egypt (Exodus 20:2).

God wanted them to remember how terribly they were treated when they were slaves.

The idea being that they were never to treat each other the way the Egyptians treated them when they were slaves before God delivered them—which is the background of this section.

From our cultural perspective we would have expected God to abolish slavery altogether—but instead, in His wisdom, He allowed certain forms of servitude but only under His strict guidelines and regulations.

One historian said,

“Without ever defending the practice of slavery, the Bible assumes that some form of servitude will continue. Yet it transforms the institution by carefully regulating the relationship between master and slave in ways that eliminate abuse and ultimately cause slavery (at least as we know it) to disappear.”

You see, as Americans, when we think of slavery we think of it in the context of the slavery in our country that led to the Civil War—and that slavery was more like the slavery that the Jews experienced in Egypt—a cruel and harsh bondage.

We need to understand that the servitude God allowed in Jewish culture was vastly different from the kind of slavery and servitude that blacks were subjected to in the deep south a couple of hundred years ago.

Back in Moses’ day when a man couldn’t pay off a debt or maybe his crops failed—what recourse did he have?

If he couldn’t pay off his debt—he couldn’t file for chapter 11 or 13.

In many ancient cultures everything he owned including him and his entire family were sold into slavery—often never to see each other again.

Or what if his crops failed how was he going to provide for his family?

The answer was that he could put himself into servitude to another who would pay him so he could work off the debt or provide for his family.

He wasn't a slave as we think of a slave—he was more of an indentured servant.

He had rights and the servitude was only allowed for six years—

Exodus 21:1-2 (NKJV)

¹ "Now these *are* the judgments which you shall set before them: ² If you buy a Hebrew servant, he shall serve six years; and in the seventh he shall go out free and pay nothing.

And so if you were a Hebrew and you owed the debt to another Hebrew you could enter into this arrangement with him—but it would only last for six years max—and then the person you owed the debt to would have to set you free and the remaining debt he had to forgive.

Again, this was not really slavery but voluntary servitude—one author put it this way:

"They were not slaves, as we usually think of the term, but something more like apprentices, hired hands, or indentured laborers. They lived in their master's home, where they worked hard in exchange for room, board, and an honest wage."

Understand that involuntary slavery was forbidden by God.

Only a few verses later, in Exodus 21:16, God instituted the death penalty for slave traders:

Exodus 21:16 (NKJV)

¹⁶ "He who kidnaps a man and sells him, or if he is found in his hand, shall surely be put to death.

This verse rules out the whole institution of slavery as it was practiced in Africa and the West, and as it is still practiced in some parts of the world today.

That's why I say that when the Bible deals with the subject of masters and servants—it has little to do with the kind of slavery that saw black Africans kidnaped by slave traders and brought to America—which was a flagrant violation of the law of God.

Another major difference between servitude in Israel and most other forms of slavery is that in Israel not only was the servitude temporary—but also when Hebrew slaves were set free in the seventh year, they were not to be sent away empty-handed.

Instead, their masters were required to give them everything they needed to make a new start:

Deuteronomy 15:12-15 (NKJV)

¹² "If your brother, a Hebrew man, or a Hebrew woman, is sold to you and serves you six years, then in the seventh year you shall let him go free from you. ¹³ And when you send him away free from you, you shall not let him go away empty-handed; ¹⁴ you shall supply him liberally from your flock, from your threshing floor, and from your winepress. *From what* the LORD has blessed you with, you shall give to him. ¹⁵ You shall remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the LORD your God redeemed you; therefore I command you this thing today.

In other words, you were required back then to help your fellow Jew get a fresh start in life.

Once again, an historian comments on this—

"This proves that the Biblical form of slavery had a constructive purpose. It was for the benefit of the servant as well as the master...By selling themselves to other members of the covenant community, debtors became members of stable households, where their needs were met and where they could get on-the-job training. They learned how to work in the context of a family. This was all in preparation for their ultimate freedom. Thus slavery had a redemptive purpose. Its goal was not perpetual bondage but responsible independence. The Hebrew servant was bound for freedom."

Now of course in modern societies there are welfare programs to help the poor.

The government has put in place debt restructuring laws to help people pay off their debt and even bankruptcy laws to wipe out debt altogether and give a person a fresh start.

So there is no more need for the kind of temporary slavery laws that Israel had back then.

Exodus 21:3-4 (NKJV)

³ If he comes in by himself, he shall go out by himself; if he *comes in* married, then his wife shall go out with him. ⁴ If his master has given him a wife, and she has borne him sons or daughters, the wife and her children shall be her master's, and he shall go out by himself.

So pretty straight forward—but then God adds a provision that every believer in Christ would make use of in the future.

Exodus 21:5-6 (NKJV)

⁵ But if the servant plainly says, 'I love my master, my wife, and my children; I will not go out free,' ⁶ then his master shall bring him to the judges. He shall also bring him to the door, or to the doorpost, and his master shall pierce his ear with an awl; and he shall serve him forever.

This is what is called the “law of the bond-slave”.

A bond-slave is someone who voluntarily places him (or her) self into slavery to another—for the rest of their life.

Once again, the goal of life is not to find freedom—it's to find the right master.

And in fact, when you find Jesus Christ and become His bond-slave (a voluntary slave for life)—then and only then will you find true freedom.

Before we received Jesus as our Master—we thought we had freedom.

Many of us took drugs, got drunk and slept with as many as we could—all in the name of freedom.

However, we discovered that what we thought was freedom was really cruel bondage—a bondage that was slowly destroying us.

But by God’s grace we finally *woke up* to that reality and we came to Jesus and said,

“I have been the master of my life all of these years. I told myself I was living a life of freedom, doing whatever I wanted and no one told me otherwise. But now I realize that the only Master that can give me true freedom is You Lord. Please take me to your house and pin me to it as your bond-slave for the rest of my life.”

Psalm 40:6 (NKJV)

⁶ Sacrifice and offering You did not desire; My ears You have opened (‘digged’)...

Jesus was a perfect bond-slave to the Father—

Philippians 2:7 (NKJV)

⁷ but made Himself of no reputation, taking the form of a bondservant, *and* coming in the likeness of men.

Exodus 21:7 (NKJV)

⁷ "And if a man sells his daughter to be a female slave, she shall not go out as the male slaves do.

In other words, she shall not go free at the beginning of the seventh year like a man—why?

The context seems to suggest she doesn't go free at the beginning of the seventh year because the master who bought her had betrothed her to himself as a concubine or wife.

The betrothal period in Jewish culture was different from the engagement period in our culture.

During the Jewish betrothal period the couple was considered legally married and yet there was no physical contact between them (and they didn't live together) until the groom finished building a place for them to live—usually connected to his father's house. (Explain)

If the man decided to break things off and not go through with the wedding ceremony—they would have to get a divorce since they were legally married.

And if either the bride or groom should die before the wedding ceremony—she would be considered a widow and he a widower.

And let me say this with regard to v.7—it seems harsh that a father would sell his daughter to be a slave to another man—but some fathers saw it as the best course of action for the welfare of their daughters.

One author gives insight into this from a cultural point of view—

“To understand these laws, it is necessary to know the cultural context. While we do not have all the details we might like, we know enough to recognize that these laws had a benevolent purpose. The man who sold his daughter was not trying to get rid of her but to improve her prospects in life.

What this verse describes was really a form of arranged marriage, which, however strange it may sound to most Americans, has been common in many parts of the world for most of human history. A poor man would send his daughter to a rich man in the hope that she would become a permanent member of his household. She entered into a conditional form of servitude, hoping that eventually she might marry the [master or the] master's son.”

Exodus 21:8 (NKJV)

⁸ If she does not please her master, who has betrothed her to himself, then he shall let her be redeemed. He shall have no right to sell her to a foreign people, since he has dealt deceitfully with her.

Let me put that verse in the order that will communicate the idea so as not to confuse—

“If she does not please her master, who has betrothed her to himself, then he shall let her be redeemed since he has dealt deceitfully with her. He shall have no right to sell her to a foreign people.”

So, after he betroths her to himself, if he decides that he doesn't want to go through with the wedding ceremony to finalize his marriage to this gal—then he needs to let her be redeemed by her family and set free—“*since he has dealt deceitfully with her.*”

In other words, promised he was going to marry her but then backed out (breach of promise).

And God forbid His people from selling a fellow Jew to foreigners to be slaves—since they wouldn't treat them with the kind of respect and kindness that God commanded a Hebrew master to treat a Hebrew slave with in His law.

Exodus 21:9-11 (NKJV)

⁹ And if he has betrothed her to his son, he shall deal with her according to the custom of daughters. ¹⁰ If he [the son] takes another *wife* [in addition to this wife], he shall not diminish her food, her clothing, and her marriage rights. ¹¹ And if he does not do these three for her, then she shall go out free, without *paying* money.

So here we have a situation where the master is pleased with this young maidservant—and gives her to his son as a wife.

But being a wealthy family, maybe down the road the son falls for a woman from another wealthy family and they get married—which means the son now has two wives—a slave wife and a wealthy, free wife.

God is saying that the slave wife, who is no longer the favored wife, cannot be treated like she was no longer the man's wife (like a mere unmarried servant girl once again)—she was to maintain all the rights of a wife.

She was still to have the same food and clothing allotted to her that she always had as his wife—and she was not to be deprived of the sexual privileges that belong to a wife (which leads to her having children).

God said that if the husband doesn't continue to do these three things for her (food, clothing/shelter and sexual privileges)—then she was to be set free to return to her family without having to be redeemed with money by her relatives.

The Laws Concerning Violence

Exodus 21:12 (NKJV)

¹² "He who strikes a man so that he dies shall surely be put to death."

What's in view here is premeditated murder.

And notice that God didn't qualify it with mitigating circumstances—*"Well he killed the guy in cold blood but he was the victim of a terrible childhood so he should be found not guilty or given a lighter sentence so that he's out in ten years..."*

God is very direct—a person who plans and carries out the murder another person is to be put to death—PERIOD!

Exodus 21:13 (NKJV)

13 However, if he did not lie in wait, but God delivered *him* into his hand, then I will appoint for you a place where he may flee.

This is talking about manslaughter.

There are two kinds of manslaughter—voluntary and involuntary.

Voluntary manslaughter is often called a “heat of passion” crime.

One lawyer said,

“The classic example of voluntary manslaughter involves a husband who comes home unexpectedly to find his wife committing adultery. If the sight of the affair provokes the husband into such a heat of passion that he kills the paramour right then and there, a judge or jury might very well consider the killing to be voluntary manslaughter.”

Involuntary manslaughter often refers to unintentional homicide from criminally negligent or reckless conduct.

I would imagine that would include getting drunk and then getting behind the wheel of a car where you hit and kill another person—it was not your intent to kill them but your reckless conduct still took another person’s life.

This might result in the person being found guilty of involuntary manslaughter which carries with it a much lighter sentence than does premeditated murder seeing that there was no intent to kill—no ‘malice aforethought’.

However, in Israel if someone killed a member of your family the oldest son in the family was designated as “the avenger of blood.”

And he would be honor bound to avenge his dead relative's life by killing the person who killed his family member.

This would even apply to accidents—like when you're in the woods chopping down a tree and your friend is standing by you.

As you're chopping the tree you swing the axe back and the head flies off and strikes your friend and kills him—that was a total accident but the avenger of blood would still come after you.

What do you do? Well God said in Exodus 21:13 that He would appoint a place where the person could flee to and be safe—they were eventually called “cities of refuge”.

Numbers 35:11-14 (NKJV)

¹¹ then you shall appoint cities to be cities of refuge for you, that the manslayer who kills any person accidentally may flee there. ¹² They shall be cities of refuge for you from the avenger, that the manslayer may not die until he stands before the congregation in judgment. ¹³ And of the cities which you give, you shall have six cities of refuge. ¹⁴ You shall appoint three cities on this side of the Jordan, and three cities you shall appoint in the land of Canaan, *which* will be cities of refuge.

So there were six cities of refuge God appointed and strategically placed (three on the east side of the Jordan River and three on the west side) so that you were never more than a day's journey (ten miles) from one of these cities—no matter where you lived in Israel.

These cities were only for those people who had committed manslaughter or had accidentally killed someone—the cities of refuge were definitely not for anyone who had committed premeditated murder—there was no mercy for that—

Exodus 21:14 (NKJV)

¹⁴ **"But if a man acts with premeditation against his neighbor, to kill him by treachery, you shall take him from My altar, that he may die. (Explain)**

So if you killed someone accidentally and the avenger of blood was hot on your trail—if you could make it to one of these cities of refuge before he got to you—he couldn't touch you, you were safe—as long as you stayed in the city of refuge.

He could hang outside the walls waiting for you to come out to kill you—but he couldn't go into the city to kill you.

Now the first thing the elders would do upon your arrival was to question you about the circumstances that led to the death of the person you had killed.

If they did indeed determine that it wasn't premeditated murder you'd be allowed to stay in the city for protection.

If on the other hand the elders of the city determined that it was a premeditated act—they would turn you over to the avenger of blood who would kill you.

The interesting thing about this was you had to stay inside the city if you wanted to be safe from the avenger of blood—until the High Priest died and then you were free to go home and the avenger of blood couldn't touch you.

These cities of refuge were a picture of Christ—our place of safety from the *sword of judgment*.

In Hebrews 6 the writer talks about how we fled to Christ for refuge from coming judgment.

The idea of fleeing to Christ for refuge is a reference to the cities of refuge in the O.T.

However, there is *a crucial distinction* between Jesus and the cities of refuge.

The cities of refuge only helped the *innocent* (those not guilty of premeditated murder)—Jesus is our “place of refuge” where the guilty can flee to and find safety and security from judgment.

But it was the responsibility of the person to flee to one of these cities of refuge—in other words his safety wasn’t automatic simply because a place of safety existed.

It only protected him when he entered into it—outside the city there was death, but inside life and safety.

The same is true with Jesus whom we are commanded to flee to “*to escape the wrath to come.*”

In Him alone is life and safety—outside of Christ there is judgment and death.

D.L. Moody’s sermon, “What Must I Do to Be Saved?”

“Now for my illustration. Suppose I have killed a man. I am out away in the woods working, and my axe slips out of my hand, and kills the man working with me. I know that his kinsman, his brother, is not far away. The news will soon reach him that I have killed his brother. What shall I do?

I start for the city of refuge, over there away on the hill, ten miles off. I run - and we are told that in those days there used to be signposts with the word "Refuge," written in great red letters, so that a man might read as he ran; he need not stop. I have been told that there was a finger pointing towards the city, and a man who could not read might see the hand. A man does not have to learn to read before he can be saved. I see that hand; it is pointing to the city of refuge. The gate is wide open, but it is ten miles away. I leap over the highway. I do not look behind, to the right hand or to the left. I do not listen to this man or to that man, but, like John Bunyan, I put my fingers in my ears.

The avenger has drawn his sword, and is on my track. I leap over into the highway; and, pretty soon, I can hear him behind me, Away I go, over that bridge, across that stream, up that mountain, along that valley, - but I can hear him coming nearer and nearer.

There is the watchman; I can see him on the wall of the city. He gives notice to the inhabitants that a refugee is coming. I see the citizens on the wall of the city watching, and when I get near I hear them calling, "Run, run! Escape, escape! He is very near you! Run! escape!" I press on; leap through the gate of the city; and at last I am safe.

One minute I am outside, and the next I am inside. One minute I am exposed to that sword; it may come down upon me at any minute: the next minute I am safe.

Do I feel any difference? I feel I am behind the walls: that is the difference. It is a fact. There I am. The avenger can come up to the gates of the city, but he cannot come in. He cannot lay his sword upon me. The law of the land shields me now. I am under the protection of that city; I have saved my life; but I had no time for lingering.

A great many of you are trying to get into the city of refuge, and there are enemies trying to stop you, But do not listen to them. Your friends tell you to escape. Make haste! Delay not for a single moment!

The admonition is the same today—flee to Jesus as quickly as you can to find refuge from the sword of judgment.

There is no time to waste, today is the day of salvation—tomorrow isn't promised or guaranteed to anyone.

Jesus Himself is beckoning each lost sinner—*“Come to Me, run to Me and I will receive you and you will be safe from coming judgment.”*

We'll pick it up in v.15 next week and we should start moving faster now.