

## **What About Slavery?**

**Exodus 21:1-11**

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If you have your Bibles I'd invite you to turn with me to Exodus chapter 21. We're continuing our study through the Book of the Covenant, that is that section of Scripture that runs from towards the end of Exodus chapter 20 through Exodus chapter 24. The introduction of the Book of the Covenant we studied the last time when we looked at Exodus 20, 22-26. It focuses on worship. Not surprisingly, worship is the first matter dealt with at the conclusion of the section in Exodus, chapter 20, giving us the Ten Commandments. The Book of the Covenant is distinct from the ten words. The Book of the Covenant contains applications of the principles of the Ten Commandments to the specific needs of Israel as a society at the time, as well as general principles which are universally applicable to all of life.

The very first word of Exodus 21:1 is actually a conjunction, which shows that even though the Book of the Covenant is distinct from the Ten Commandments, though it is a set of statute laws and case laws and category laws, nevertheless it is intimately connected to what God has revealed in these Ten Commandments. And so, what we will find in the Book of the Covenant is descriptive and applicatory and illustrative of how God's ten words ought to be applied in the daily life of Israel. The ten words give the fundamental legal principles for Israel as a society. Of course, they do more than that, but with regard to Israel as a society, the ten words give the fundamental legal principles.

The covenant code, the Book of the Covenant, applies those principles to specific social context. The covenant code is made up of negative commands, it's made up of case laws, that is, illustrations of how the general principles of the ten words might be applied in a specific situation. It also contains, however, exhortations and promises. And so it's not like a typical modern legal code. In a modern legal code you wouldn't expect the code to pause and go into a series that recounts the promises of the government to the people or to go through a series recounting or exhorting the people to obedience, but that's exactly what you find in this Book of the Covenant. And it shows God's concern that the principles of the ten words would permeate the way society looked and worked and acted in Israel. So, let's turn to God's Word in Exodus 21, beginning in verse 1.

*Heavenly Father, we thank you for this Word. It is a strange Word to our ears. We do not live in a society that operates in these ways and yet we know that You have meant all of Your Word for our edification. So, edify us tonight from this Word of Scripture, and help us to apply it in our own daily lives in accordance with Your Holy Spirit. In Jesus' Name we pray. Amen.*

How in the world can the study of Old Testament slavery laws be practical for Christian life today? I mean, beyond arguing about the theoretical rights and wrongs of slavery, or the values or demerits of reparations and all sorts of theoretical and abstract discussions that we can get into today, how in the world can a study of the Old Testament slavery laws help us live the Christian life? Well, I hope to give you a hint at how they can, and to do that by stressing two or three things.

In this passage I want you to see first, in verse 1, the ordinances. Then in verses 2 through 6, these laws on Hebrew slaves, and in verses 7 through 11, these laws on female Hebrew slaves. And as we look at these things, I want us to learn something about the function of these civil laws. Second, I want you to learn something about the law of the bondservant in verses 2 through 6, and then, third, I want you to learn something about how God wants us to care for those who are least in society, and especially we will see this in verses 7 through 11.

### **I. Ordinances on slavery.**

Let's begin with verse 1, where we see the ordinances announced. This verse is the title verse for the rest of the laws in this section. This section of the Book of the Covenant will run all the way into Chapter 22, and we learn here, in verse 1, that God's norms for community life in Israel are derived from the ten words. In other words, it's the principles of the ten words which are being put into place in the community life of Israel, and, we learn here that these norms are meant to be known by all the people of Israel. Now, that may seem absolutely just intuitive, common sense, doesn't even need to be said, but you can see in a moment why that is so significant.

First of all, let me remind you again that these chapters are known as the Book of the Covenant. That title we said last time comes from Exodus, Chapter 24, verses 4 and 7, and title itself — The Book of the Covenant — underscores this truth. It underscores that Israel's law does not come from man. It does not come from human convention. It doesn't come from human tradition. It isn't derived from social contract. It comes from a divine source. Israel's law comes from the transcendent God who enters into covenant with His people. And so we have here this code of practice called The Book of the Covenant.

This transcendent God is interested in the corporate welfare of His people, and

He's also interested in community righteousness. He wants a community which acts according to these eternal principles of justice. And in this Book of the Covenant we find social rules and we find moral imperatives and ethical injunctions and civil and criminal laws and ritual prescriptions about worship, and all of these things are seen to be an expression of God's will. They are not something Moses is making up, they're not just things that have been handed down in the tradition, they derive from the principles of God's law as He has set them forth in the Ten Commandments.

Now, the striking thing about this book is, my friends, that it is written. In Exodus 24, we're told that Moses himself writes down these laws. Now, what's the big deal about that? In Egypt the law was not written down. Did you know that? And you know what that meant? It meant that when you showed up before Pharaoh and you had a complaint, you didn't know what the law was. Because it was all up here in Pharaoh's mind, and you know what that meant? It meant Pharaoh was law! And it meant there was no possibility of equal justice because Pharaoh could make it up as he went. It was a classic example of the principle of *Lex Rex*, the King is law. That's not how it was to be in Israel. In Israel, law was king, God's law was king, and what did that do? It provided equal justice for the whole of society. As long as the law is not written down, you don't know where the boundaries are. You don't know what your rights are. You don't know what you can do and what you can't do and an arbitrary despot can rule you. But once the law is written down and it is pronounced to the people, and you notice in verse 1, what is Moses explicitly told that he must do? Tell the ordinances to whom.... to all the people. Suddenly you can have equal justice. What an enormous blessing! They would have known this. We could miss this, you see. We live in a society which benefits from these principles, but they did not take this for granted, for they had been in a land where the law was unwritten.

Now, let me say another thing. There are four parts to this Book of the Covenant. There is first the section we are in right now which covers civil and criminal matters. It runs all the way to chapter 22, verse 16. Then, there are category laws, and derivative laws, which are listed from 22:17, all the way to 23:19. Then, in chapter 23: 20 to 33, God repeats His promises to the people. And in chapter 24 the covenant relationship between God and His people is ratified. It's confirmed. It's established. And a covenant ceremony is held in order to confirm it.

Now, let's look at verse 1, and I'd like you to see 3 parts to verse 1. You notice the first words: "Now these are..." This verse is the heading for this entire section of the Book of the Covenant and "now these are", which could be read "and these are" connects the following laws to the Ten Commandments that God has already given. In other words, Moses is reminding us, even by the language there, that these laws are the application of God's ten words.

Secondly, look at the next phrase: "Now these are the ordinances" or the next

word or description — the ordinances are called *mishpatim* or judicial rulings. They are legal enactments in general. They are authoritative standards for conduct.

Third, look at verse 1 at the end, “which you are to set before them.” Knowledge of the law is for all the people, it's not just for a group of scholarly specialists, it's not just for the judges, certainly it's not just for those who are highest in the echelon of Israel's ruling class. It is for all the people. And we see even in this introductory title phrase that God wants to see His righteousness and His standards reflected in the whole of the society of Israel. He wants to see the community, the society, reflecting these eternal principles of rightness and of justice which He has set forth in the Ten Commandments. That's the first thing we see when we look at this passage tonight.

## **II. Laws for Hebrew slaves.**

Secondly, however, I'd like you to look at verses 2 through 6. These are the laws on the Hebrew slaves. Now, before we get into this passage we need to pause and say just a couple of things. There have been varying approaches to understanding what the Bible says on slavery over the years. And let me give you a short synopsis of those different views.

It seems to me there have been at least three approaches to the Bible on slavery. One says that the Bible allows or justifies or even sanctions slavery. And you can find both Christians arguing that and liking it, and non-Christians arguing that and not liking it. In other words, you'll find Christians saying, “Well, the Bible allows for it, sanctions slavery, and that's a good thing.” Or you can find non-Christians saying, “Yes, the Bible allows or sanctions slavery and that shows that the Bible is sub-standard, immoral and outmoded and it's not God's Word.” So, that's one approach, the Bible allows for it, sanctions slavery.

The second approach comes to the Bible and says “No, the Bible deplores slavery and in fact, the Bible abolishes slavery.” And again, usually that view comes from Christians. Christians amongst the evangelicals in Britain two centuries ago, when William Wilberforce and the various members of the Clapham sect began to argue against slavery in the British Empire. They went to the Bible and they attempted to argue from the Bible that the Bible deplores slavery and actually works toward the abolition of slavery.

Then, there's been a third approach. And this approach basically says that the Bible is irrelevant on this issue or that the Bible is outmoded on this issue and we need to move past the Bible on this matter and move forward into our higher modern sense of right and wrong. And believe it or not, you can find both Christians, or at least those who claim to be Christians, and non-Christians arguing that. Interestingly enough, in the United States in the 19th Century, many

in the abolition movement took that position about the Bible, that the Bible was outmoded and we needed to move beyond these rudimentary and old-fashioned and irrelevant commands and come to a higher consciousness. On the other hand, you can find non-Christians saying this again as a charge against the Bible in order to reject it. Now, that's one thing I wanted to say. There are lots of different views on what the Bible says about slavery.

The second thing I want to say before we look at these passages is to remind you of the difference between the kind of slavery that is mentioned in the Bible in this specific passage, and the kind of slavery that existed in ancient near-eastern cultures, and the kind of slavery which existed in ante-bellum America and through the African slave trade. We need to be very careful about how we draw parallels between those two things.

The point that I want you to see in verses 2 through 6, and this may surprise you after having heard these things read out loud, but the point that I want to drive home is that these laws show irrefutably that God is concerned for the rights and the well-being of the very least in society. Isn't it mind boggling, my friends, isn't it mind boggling that the very first thing dealt with in the Book of the Covenant after worship is the rights of slaves. Now think about that for a minute. Israel was a nation of slaves or, to be more accurate, a nation of freed slaves. The Ten Commandments were introduced with a word from God which said, what? "I'm the God who brought you out of slavery." Now think about that for a minute. God never wanted Israel to forget that she was a nation of slaves and that He brought her out of that. And, He never wanted Israel to forget His mercy to slaves in the way they treated slaves. That's one thing I want you to see.

But, in addition to that I want to tell you this: you can look at all the near-Eastern law codes and you will not find one that starts with laws protecting the rights of slaves, except the code that God wrote. Now we are told in this passage that God gave this code to Moses. Moses wrote it down but God gave this code to Moses.

The only law code in the ancient world that started with the rights of slaves was Israel's. If you look at the code of Hammurabi, and some of you have heard of Hammurabi's Code, which contains 282 sections. Guess when the Code of Hammurabi gets to its corresponding treatment on slaves? Section 278-282. Right at the bottom of the list. And then when he gets there the laws aren't nearly as protective of the slaves' rights and interests. But God starts with the rights of slaves. God did not want His people to forget His mercy to slaves in the way they treated slaves."

Now, you may say to me, why didn't God just abolish slavery in Israel? And here's the answer: I don't know. And you know what? You don't either! And if somebody tells you that they know, they don't, because God didn't tell us. But I can tell you this: Jesus does tell us that some of Moses' legislation was

concessionary. One of the places He tells you that has to do with Moses' divorce law. And I can make an argument from the passage we're going to study tonight that we can see concessionary examples in this code. So, it may be that God in His love and in His mercy acts here, by treating these things, not putting His stamp of approval on this social arrangement, but by way of concession doing that which was good for His people in their particular circumstance.

By the way, this points up several major problems with the view that we are simply supposed to take these laws and then bring them into our society and apply them as God's universal norms for social justice and righteousness. Such a view does not realize the uniqueness of the Decalogue. The Decalogue is utterly unique and it's distinct in its permanence and in its universality from the covenant code. We've already seen one of the covenant codes that's changed — the code on the altar — originally there could be many altars. Eventually, in Deuteronomy, there's one altar. In this passage tonight we've already seen a law that will be changed. What's the first word in the word of the laws in verse 2? It's about Hebrew slaves. By the time you get to Deuteronomy, you're not supposed to have Hebrew slaves.

So, the law even within the law, is changing in the covenant code. Ten Commandments aren't changing. You don't find a revision of the Ten Commandments. You don't get to Isaiah's time and "Oh yeah, by the way, we're down to 8 commandments now." The Ten Commandments are still in place. You don't get to Paul's time in 1 Timothy, chapter 1, and find 'no more Ten Commandments.' They are still there, the Ten Commandments are universal, unchanging. The covenant code changes.

Secondly, the view that we're supposed to just take these codes and plop them down in our society doesn't appreciate the changes and developments within the law of Moses'. We've just mentioned even within this law there are changes. In Moses time, children of Israel are in the wilderness now. When they get into the land, all sorts of new laws pop up. And certain old laws are changed.

Thirdly, this view that we're just supposed to take these over into our time doesn't appreciate the concessionary nature of some of this legislation, which God is doing by ways of constraining sin without necessarily condoning some of the things He's constraining. He's going to deal with laws, for instance, in just a few verses, on how to deal with murderers and manslaughters. That doesn't mean He condones murder and manslaughter. But He is going to put in places things which are designed to mitigate some of the worst excesses which come out of such behavior.

Fourth, such a view that we take this law into our society and plop it down doesn't appreciate that God can appoint something for one time and not mean it for all times, as He clearly does with the very first law about Hebrew slaves in verse 2, which is changed by the time we get to Deuteronomy. Now, look at me, I've got

two minutes to finish this thing.

Let me zero in on the slave law here. Israel, we've already said, was a nation of slaves. But there is no evidence that slavery was ever of major economic importance in Israel, as it had been in Egypt. In Egypt you had a huge slave class, and having those slaves was important to the economics of the society as it was to the American South. Apparently there was never a significant slave economy in Israel, which makes it all the more striking that God would start with laws on slaves. Why? Because He's concerned about the least in society. He's concerned about a social and legal standing for the ultimate dispossessed group. Now, there are many ways that you could have become a Hebrew slave. You could have become a Hebrew slave through committing a crime. If you stole and couldn't pay it back with restitution, guess what? The judge could sentence you to indentured servitude. Poverty could lead you into slavery. Insolvency could lead you into slavery. There were about eleven ways that a Hebrew could have gotten into slavery at this particular time. But whatever the case, it's obviously tragic when someone finds himself in this circumstance, and yet, notice that all of the laws except one, all of the laws that are mentioned from verses 2 to 11, protect who? The master? No. The slave! All of these slave laws are about the slave. They're not about protecting the master's right. This is mind-boggling. By the way, that in and of itself reminds you how incomplete this code is. If you're looking for a complete code that's going to cover every circumstance, you don't find it here. What you find is illustrations on how the Word of God in the Ten Commandments might look as applied to a specific situation in society. Look, you get past verse 11, guess how many more slave laws there are in the Book of Exodus. Zippo! None. This is the slave code. It clearly shows you that this is not everything that could be said about righteousness regarding slaves. This is a divinely provided illustration of how the principles of the Ten Commandments are to be applied in society. That's another rabbit trail that I can't go down now.

Notice in verse 2, how is the slave protected? First of all, he can't be kept beyond the duration of any more than 6 years, because every 7th year Jubilee, whenever along the way that you've been taken as a slave, you've got to be set free. Not only do you have to be set free, but your master cannot require you to pay a redemption price to him. You go free - *free!* Your master cannot say, "We'll, you've been a laborer for me, it's going to cost me for you to leave as a laborer, you need to pay me compensation." No, the slave, every six years, goes free - *free!*

In verse 3, if he came single, he left single. But if he came married, even though the master had had the responsibility for caring for your wife and children while you served him, he went with wife and children. Again, it protects the slave's right.

The 4th verse shows you something of the concessionary nature of this legislation. We're told here that if the master had given him a wife (and what this

is referring to is the common near-eastern practice of a master giving a wife to a slave for the purpose of siring house-bred servants), and we're told here that if that is the case then the master gets to keep his wife and children. This is a concubine relationship, really. By the way, this is the only piece of legislation protecting the master's rights listed in the whole section. Even then, immediately we're told the man can remain in servitude and keep his family, or, later on we'll find out, he can pay a redemption price and bring them out with him. So, there are other ways in which the family can be kept together.

In verse 5, we have a backdrop to the bond-slave law. Here the man, if he is loyal to his master and to his family, can pledge himself into public service of the master. The vow has to be made in public, and it has to be made at the sanctuary before God, and he then becomes the master's servant for life. This is the background for the New Testament language of *bondservant*. Remember how often Paul calls himself a *bondservant*, a permanent servant of Jesus Christ. This is where it comes from, right here. Here is the *bondservant* law. And what does Jesus continue to stress in His teaching to us about His role? What is He? He's God's *bondservant* for our sakes. "I came not to be served," He said, "but to serve." "It is my meat to do the will of Him who sent Me." Jesus emphasizes that He is God's bond-slave for our sakes.

Our time is up, but I want to emphasize this: it is very clear from this slave law that God is concerned for the rights and the well-being of the very least in society and so should we. We should be concerned for the rights, for the welfare, for the justice of those who are the very least able to protect themselves. That's one of the great moral, universal principles that comes out of this passage on Old Testament Hebrew slaves. Let's pray.

*Heavenly Father, give us a generous heart towards those who are weakest and least and over-looked and taken advantage of. And remind us again of how Your Dear Son, Your Only Begotten Son, the Lord of Glory, became a bond-slave for our sakes. And then teach us His mercy. In Jesus' Name. Amen.*

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