

EXODUS

THE GOD WHO REDEEMS

SESSION OBJECTIVE: EXODUS 21:1-11

To understand more about the ordinances concerning slaves.

Read the Text:

Now these are the rules that you shall set before them. 2 When you buy a Hebrew slave, he shall serve six years, and in the seventh he shall go out free, for nothing. 3 If he comes in single, he shall go out single; if he comes in married, then his wife shall go out with him. 4 If his master gives him a wife and she bears him sons or daughters, the wife and her children shall be her master's, and he shall go out alone. 5 But if the slave 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 God, and he shall bring him to the door or the doorpost. And his master shall bore his ear through with an awl, and he shall be his slave forever. 7 "When a man sells his daughter as a slave, she shall not go out as the male slaves do. 8 If she does not please her master, who has designated her for himself, then he shall let her be redeemed. He shall have no right to sell her to a foreign people, since he has broken faith with her. 9 If he designates her for his son, he shall deal with her as with a daughter. 10 If he takes another wife to himself, he shall not diminish her food, her clothing, or her marital rights. 11 And if he does not do these three things for her, she shall go out for nothing, without payment of money. (Exodus 21:1-11, ESV)

Study the Text:

New Regulations

Chapter 21 begins with a new set of “rules” that are to be “set before” the people of Israel (Ex. 21:1). The term “rules” is the Hebrew *mishpatim*, which can be understood in a number of ways, including “laws,” “rules,” “ordinances,” “judgments,” or “regulations.” In the context of chapters 21 and 22, it is clear that these are more akin to rules or regulations for the covenant community. It might seem strange that another set of rules is being given barely on the heels of the Ten Commandments, but these rules will merely uphold with greater clarity what the Ten Commandments have already established. The rules in verses 1 through 11 have to do with respecting the human individual, particularly those who are most likely to be mistreated: *slaves*. It is important to note that in our modern context, any kind of slavery seems unjust and, therefore, contradictory to the Ten Commandments. However, we mustn't read into the text our own cultural inclinations. Two things must be brought into consideration. For one, slavery in the ancient Near Eastern context greatly differs from today's post-modern context. The term slavery is stained by the chattel slavery of nineteenth-century America, a brand of slavery that is not only reprehensible but at odds with the Biblical doctrine of humanity. Readers of the Bible must remember that the slavery described in Exodus differs greatly from this more modern practice. How could someone end up a slave in the ancient world? Either by being sold by the court of justice on account of theft (Ex. 22:1) or by selling himself due to unbearable poverty (Lev. 25:39). With that said, second, when evaluated fairly in its cultural and historical context, the regulations laid out in verses 1 through 11 are in many ways advantageous for the slave, as we will see. Below is a breakdown of the key ideas in the text.

REGULATIONS FOR PURCHASED SLAVES

Verses 2 through 6 deal with when to justly grant freedom to a slave. Slaves in Israel did not serve indefinitely, but rather they served for six years, “and in the seventh, he shall go out free, for nothing” (Ex. 21:2). There are,

however, three different circumstances given, and each circumstance comes with different directives. They are listed below.

1. A Single Man Sold as a Slave

In the event that a man is sold into slavery as a single man and comes out of servitude still single, he is to be released. Deuteronomy 15:12-18 gives further clarity, noting that the slave should not be let go “empty-handed,” but rather should be “furnished liberally” (Deut. 15:13-14). In other words, after the slave had served the six-year term, he would not only be given freedom but also furnished with enough to start a meaningful life on his own. The six years of servitude marked by the seventh year of freedom mirrors the pattern of six days of work followed by a seventh day of Sabbath rest.

2. A Married Man Sold as a Slave

A second scenario arises with regard to a man sold into slavery who is already married. In this instance, “his wife shall go out with him” (Ex. 21:3).

3. A Single Man Sold as Slave and Given a Wife

In the event that a man goes into slavery single and is given a wife by his master while serving as a slave, and she bears him children, the man was to be released after six years of service, but the woman and child were still under the jurisdiction of the master. The man could remain married to her, but because of the prior arrangement of servitude, her marriage did not cancel her debt of servitude. This might seem unfair and unjust, but note that another regulation was suggested: “But if the slave 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 God, and he shall bring him to the door or the doorpost. And his master shall bore his ear through with an awl, and he shall be his slave forever” (Ex. 21:5-6). Again, this seems odd to our modern sensibilities, but consider two additional details. First, this was a known regulation. One would have to enter into the union of marriage and begin having children as a slave, knowing this was the eventual outcome. In other words, no one was being tricked. Beyond that, this regulation provided a way by which a male slave could choose to remain in servitude in order to stay in union with his wife and children. Slaves were treated with equity. They were given the Sabbath off, they were fed and cared for, and were, in many ways, a meaningful part of a family. This arrangement seems unfair, but considering the details, it was actually a favorable way for the slave not to be separated from his family that was formed during his years of servitude.

REGULATIONS FOR DAUGHTERS SOLD INTO MARRIAGE

Our modern sensibilities once again come under fire in verses 7 through 11 when regulations are given for instances in which a man sells his daughter as a slave. Why would any good father sell his daughter as a slave? While verse 7 doesn’t provide context, verses 8 through 11 make it clear that this was not simply slavery but servitude with the view of marriage. This explains why, unlike the male slaves who have term limits of six years of servitude, the daughters sold into slavery do not have term limits. Why? Because marriage is intended to be forever. These are, in other words, regulations for arranged marriages. Arranged marriages strike against the “true love” culture we live in, but note that arranged marriages still exist today and have a higher success rate than more modern, conventional marriage arrangements. Again, there are circumstances given with different directives.

1. The Master Does Not Want to Marry Her

In the first circumstance, the issue at hand is a lack of desire from the master to follow through with marriage with the woman he initially arranged to marry. If this were to happen, “he shall let her be redeemed” or taken

by another man to be married. Additionally, “he shall have no right to sell her to a foreign people since he has broken faith with her” (Ex. 21:8). She is not property to be sold off to just anyone. She must be honored as an image-bearer and given a fair opportunity to be married by another.

2. The Master Designates Her to Marry His Son

In the second instance, she could be designated to marry his son. If this were to happen, she would no longer be seen as a servant at all but rather as a “daughter,” with all of the familial benefits (Ex. 21:9).

3. The Master Decides to Marry Someone Else

In the event the master marries another, he is to still give fair treatment to the servant woman as if she is to be his wife. This does not entail any kind of sexual union (because they have not been married), but it does include all of the other benefits, including food, clothing, and priority in the household. This regulation would prevent the ill-treatment of a woman cast aside by a man who marries someone else. If he is unwilling to keep this up, he is to give her freedom.

What About Now?

Passages like this challenge us. We don’t understand a culture that operates with slavery or arranged marriages, and therefore it is easy to see nothing of redeemable value in regulations that shape these practices. However, we must resist the tendency to read our own cultural mores into the text. When understood in the proper context, these regulations demonstrate a sensitivity to the humanity of even the lowly slave. For us today, we might come away from a passage like this with the reminder that all people, including people in lower classes and even law-breakers, are created in the image of the Trinitarian God and therefore worthy of dignity (Gen. 1:26). It is easy to assign inhumane sentiment towards people guilty of egregious crimes (especially people in the news and on Facebook to which you have no personal connection), and Exodus 21:1-11 reminds us that this is wrong. We must be careful to respect all human life.

Study Questions

Day One

1. Read Exodus 21:1-2. What is the basic rule for buying “a Hebrew slave?”

2. Read Exodus 21:3. What if the man becomes a slave while he is single?

Day Two

1. Read Exodus 21:4. What if the man is already married when he becomes a slave?

2. Read Exodus 21:5-6. What if a man is single when he becomes a slave, and is given a wife?

Day Three

1. Read Exodus 21:7-8. Are female servants intended to be treated the same way as males?
-
-

2. Read Exodus 21:9. What if the man designates the woman for marriage to his son?
-
-

Day Four

1. Read Exodus 21:10. What if the man takes another wife while the woman is still designated to him?
-
-

2. Read Exodus 21:11. What if the man does not agree to these terms? Who does this rule protect?
-
-

Discuss the Text!

Week 59 Discussion: Dignity for All

Exodus 21:1-11 is a reminder of the importance of human dignity for all people. All people are made in the image of God and, therefore, should be treated as such. Talk as a group about the tendency our culture has to strip dignity from those who have committed crimes or who are in “lesser” classes than we are.

1. Icebreaker: Do all people deserve the same dignity? Why or why not?
2. How does the truth that every human being is made in the image of God (Gen. 1:26) shape the way you view people who are different from you (e.g., culturally, socially, morally)?
3. In what ways have you allowed worldly definitions of value (e.g., success, beauty, usefulness) to distort how you see the dignity of others?
4. Do you feel that others have stripped you of your dignity? If so, why?
5. What are some additional worldly categories that people fall into that might result in less dignity?
6. Kid Talk (For Home): Discuss how God made even the worst villains in His image. Being made in God's image doesn't mean a person is “saved,” but it does mean they should be given dignity, kindness, and compassion.

Takeaways:

1. The LORD gives regulations to Israel that help bring further, specific application to the Ten Commandments.
2. These regulations reveal the importance of human dignity in even the lowest societal classes.