

Slavery and Liberation in God's Law (Exodus 21:1-12)

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Please turn in your Bibles or turn on your Bibles to Ex 21. In our day of modern technology, at first glance this text looks out of sync or outdated. There's no political correctness or wokeness in what we're about to read. I sometimes begin a sermon with a story to get your attention or a provocative question. Our next text does that for us raising its own thought-provoking questions

21:1 *"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. [got your attention?] 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. [Amen. And all God's people said huh?]*

Many churches and pastors never touch a text like this, they just choose topics for their 'vision.' But when you preach through books verse-by-verse as we do, you can't avoid this subject. The seeker-friendly model skips what may offend and picks what it deems most profitable. But we believe 2 Tim 3:16: all scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching. The OT rebukes and corrects and trains in righteousness to equip us, so how does this text? This isn't a fun or a fluffy feel-good topic, but I'm called to be faithful to preach the Word. Paul said in Acts 20 he didn't shrink back from declaring God's whole counsel (nor can we). This is part of all scripture to equip us to answer critics who say scripture is pro-slavery. It trains us in righteous thinking about how women should be treated. It rebukes all human trafficking. It corrects Christians who use the Bible to abuse or misuse any human beings. It's profitable to teach on slavery biblically.

This is also useful for apologetics, it's not an embarrassment and it can be an encouragement

We're not picking and choosing what we think is relevant, but this next section is very relevant!

- For objectors to OT morality or sexuality when they point out OT slavery and polygamy
- The next section, v. 12-25, is about the death penalty and abortion (relevant topic today?)
- Then into ch 22 is a section on 'social justice' (ESV heading), 'restitution' vs. reparations
- It talks about dealing with debt and getting out of it and dealing with sex before marriage
- Ch 23 has faith healing, who Palestine belongs to, God's solution to oppression or racism

The Bible is very contemporary, and very controversial!

Some Bible passages like this can be very confusing, too. Does God want us to sell our kids? Is He encouraging or expecting us to buy wives for our sons? Does He support or endorse slavery like in our history, or taking another wife in v. 10? Is Moses just a sexist chauvinist misogynist patriarchalist putting down women as inferior? No, this is no word of a sinful man. It's radically different than ancient writings on slaves and women because it's the Word of God who redeems

- Outline:**
- 1. This condemns American slavery**
 - 2. This cares for all people and calls us to**
 - 3. This concept points us to redemption (last point to continue next week)**

It's uncomfortable to think of slavery in our nation's past, but think the nation of Israel's past. Turn back in context to Gen 47. It was different as Israel moved to Egypt. We hear Ex 21 talk about people being 'bought' and it has a different connotation today. They heard this in light of their family history in a famine as they feared starving to death. This is their historical context: Gen 47:12 *And Joseph provided his father, his brothers, and all his father's household with food, according to the number of their dependents.* ¹³ *Now there was no food in all the land, for the famine was very severe... [it would be that way 7 years, and Egypt could only make it through that year, they had nothing left]* ¹⁸ *And when that year was ended, they [Egyptians] came to him the following year and said to him, "We will not hide from my lord that our money is all spent. The herds of livestock are my lord's. There is nothing left in the sight of my lord but our bodies and our land.* ¹⁹ *Why should we die before your eyes, both we and our land? Buy us and our land for food, and we with our land will be servants to Pharaoh* [same Heb words in Ex 21, 'buy' and 'servant']

Egyptians slaved the next 6 years of famine to save their lives and help rebuild a better life after

In v. 23 Joseph buys them and provides for them seed to work in a way that benefitted all parties. The end of v. 24 says he provided food for their little ones, too, so they wouldn't lose them or their lives. So in return, v. 25: *And they said, "You have saved our lives; may it please my lord, we will be servants to Pharaoh."* ... ²⁷ *Thus Israel settled in the land of Egypt, in the land of Goshen. And they gained possessions in it, and were fruitful...*

With a godly master like Joseph in place, buying them to serve him saved many lives

That's the backdrop to Ex 21, rather than die, a desperate or destitute person could sell himself to serve 6 years. Rather than give up their little ones or their life, they could work in a short-term bondsman contract. Food and provisions would be given and resources to help them gain possessions and a new lease on life. Lev 25:35: *If your brother becomes poor and cannot maintain himself with you, you shall support him...and he shall live with you...* ³⁹ *"If your brother becomes poor beside you and sells himself to you, you shall not make him serve as a slave: he shall be with you as a hired worker..."* ⁴³ *You shall not rule over him ruthlessly but shall fear your God.*

He can sell himself, but don't rule him like a slave, respect him as an employee

So back to Ex 21:2, don't think of movie slave markets where Africans were bought by masters. Think Jews selling themselves and their services voluntarily temporarily for necessities. It was 6 years or less, not a lifetime, and it was a lifeline if poor and your life is on the line. This is not about chained blacks stolen from their homeland or chattel slavery in our land. This is not involuntary subjugation, this is indentured servitude or bonded labor in a 2-way contract. The closest U.S. analogy is a volunteer army, you serve at their will ___ years for food, housing, etc.

They own you, they tell you in boot camp, your will is subservient to theirs till time is up

True, our army pays so you can also save, but so did some Hebrews with their slaves. Lev 25:48 *'after he is sold he may be redeemed. One of his brothers may redeem him, ⁴⁹ or his uncle or his cousin may redeem him, or a close relative from his clan may redeem him. Or if he grows rich he may redeem himself.'* So 6 years was the max, but some could make money to buy themselves out earlier if friend or family couldn't.

Ex 21 is a path to redemption, and for some, a path to riches or at least a renewed livelihood

This isn't like the 17th century slave trade. Jesse Johnson (an old classmate) wrote a dissertation on this. 'In my first semester at seminary I came across a Douglas Wilson poem which implied that the American institution of slavery was good and noble... "virtue." Later I came across another work by Wilson, this one coauthored by Steve Wilkins, Southern Slavery as it Was... a thorough defense of... Christians who were slave owners... I have found many other Christians who believe... slave owners in the South who claimed the name of Christ and yet profited from the buying and selling of human beings could do so with a clean conscience before God...

[In 1800s Spurgeon in England sarcastically rebuked the master in America who would] tell his slaves that they ought to feel very grateful for being his slaves, for God Almighty made them on purpose that they might enjoy the rare privilege of being cowhided by a Christian master?"¹ ... American slavery is clearly condemned by the Bible, without equivocation or qualification. The Bible... does not condone American slavery and it certainly does not regulate it. It forbids it.²

Ex 21 should have stopped all Trans-Atlantic galley ships and whites owning blacks here

Ex 21 addresses the capture or kidnapping of Africans or any, stealing people and slave-trading. Look at v. 16 *Whoever steals a man and sells him, and anyone found in possession of him, shall be put to death.* All involved in stealing men, selling them, or slave-owning were to die according to God's law! This calls for more than the abolition of the American slave-masters, it calls for their execution! Even if they were good Christians or good masters, God's good law says they deserved to die. That kind of system in American history has the most severe words of penalty in all God's law. In ch 22 to steal property you had to pay back 4-5fold, but to steal people you paid by your life. It's not better if he's born on your plantation so you didn't kidnap or buy him, I'd say it's worse

The perpetuation of v. 16 for generations while claiming biblical justification is worst of all

God thundered and wrote this on stone: *You shall not steal.* In the 1640s the Westminster Larger Catechism said that 8th commandment forbids 'man-stealing, (1 Tim. 1:10) and receiving any... that is stolen...injustice and...oppression...and all other unjust or sinful ways of taking or withholding from our neighbour what belongs to him, or of enriching ourselves...James 5:4'³

But men preaching the law and professing that catechism violated all of that 200+ years

James says God hears the cry and judges men who don't pay the laborers who work their fields. 1 Tim 1:10 lists murderers and 'enslavers' as contrary to sound doctrine (NIV 'slave-traders'). Man-stealing, slave-trading, or involuntary lifelong enslaving is against God's law and gospel. Racial and multi-generational bondage is even worse than barbaric ancient pagans did. The law and the prophets condemn American-style slavery as much as Hamas-style kidnappers. Amos 1:6 NIV: *This is what the LORD says: "For three sins of Gaza, even for four, I will not turn back my wrath. Because she took captive whole communities and sold them to Edom, I will send fire upon the walls of Gaza that will consume her fortresses...says the Sovereign LORD. 9 This is what the LORD says: "For three sins of Tyre, even for four, I will not turn back my wrath. Because she sold whole communities of captives to Edom, disregarding a treaty of brotherhood [NLT 'selling whole villages as slaves'] Amos 2:6: they sell the righteous for silver...*

That's what Joseph's brothers did, sold a just innocent man as a slave for pieces of silver

That was in OT times but to the end times, Rev 18 says judgment will fall on cargoes of goods⁴ 'and slaves, that is, human souls...And all shipmasters and seafaring men, sailors and all whose trade is on the sea, stood far off and cried out as they saw the smoke...where all who had ships at sea grew rich by her wealth' That all builds on Ex 21:16 and also builds on Israel's history where Joseph was sold as a slave, a great evil that Israel wasn't to repeat. To steal or sell human beings against their will is against God's will and got you killed.

#1 point. This condemns American slavery, #2. This cares for all people and calls us to

In Ex 21:2 people being "bought/purchased" isn't a condescending term, it's a caring term. It involved paying for their needs and taking in to live with as part of your household. In Ex 15:16 that year they sang of all Israel as the people God lovingly "purchased" (same word). It had the connotation there of redeemed and rescued from a bad situation to a new master. Israel had no resources to get themselves out of Egypt or to avoid death in the Red Sea. But God bought and brought Israel to serve Him, then tells them to be like that too in Ex 21:2. If fellow Jews got into a bad situation with no resources, wealthier Jews could step in to help avoid debt or even death.

God didn't create or condone slavery (or debt or divorce, etc.), but His law cares for those in it

Dt 15:11 *There will always be poor people in the land. Therefore I command you to be openhanded toward your brothers and toward the poor and needy in your land. 12 If a fellow Hebrew, a man or a woman, sells himself to you and serves you six years, in the seventh year you must let him go free. 13 And when you release him, do not send him away empty-handed. 14 Supply him liberally from your flock, your threshing floor and your winepress. Give to him as the LORD your God has blessed you. 15 Remember that you were slaves in Egypt and the LORD your God redeemed you. That is why I give you this command today...v. 10 Give generously...(NIV).*

The Egyptians liberally generously gave as they sent Israel away from being slaves

But the Bible isn't pro-slavery, He starts ch 20 with I am God who brought you out of slavery. v. 2 says *'he shall go out free, for nothing,'* that's the Heb. root word for grace. It's similar in Latin, gratis (free) and gratia (grace).⁵ This isn't harsh law, this is free grace, another paying your way. With stability and patterns of responsibility after their service they reintegrated into free society. And v. 3 says whatever family he had as he began his contract, they go out free when he's free.

God isn't commending slavery, He's commanding liberation after work and kindness in the process

But v. 4 at first reading doesn't sound like a gracious caring God, it's frankly a confusing law.

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.* What is that? If their 6 years aren't up yet, they're still under contract. If she served 5 years and married a guy about to get out, she's not automatically done when he is. But a master couldn't keep her or her kids beyond 6 years according to v. 2, then they're free of all contract. Think of a man serving in the U.S. Army today (that's his 'master'). If he marries a woman in the army and she has a longer commitment, she still has to fulfill her years. The army still has a claim on her contract until her years are up.

Sometimes there's a deployment to serve before reuniting, not ideal but part of the deal

⁵ *But if the slave plainly says, 'I love my master, my wife, and my children; I will not go out free,'...* we'll come back to that in a bit, but just notice there was a way he could keep serving with loved ones. Some scholars think of v. 4 as a test whether he cared more for his family or his freedom first chance he got. He could choose to still serve with them because he loved his wife more than his life as a free man. Or Lev 25 suggests he could work to redeem his family (maybe with skills from his 6-year 'apprenticeship'). Or godly family or community can help like in 2 Kings 4 (Elisha kept a poor lady's kids from debt slavery). Or a master could pardon a debt before paid

Think of the story of Ruth and Boaz stepping in to pay what that poor family couldn't to redeem

Jesus told the story⁶ of a man who *'did not have the means to repay, his lord commanded him to be sold, along with his wife and children and all that he had, and repayment to be made. "So the slave fell to the ground and prostrated himself before him, saying, 'Have patience with me and I will repay you everything.' "And the lord of that slave felt compassion and released him and forgave him the debt... [the point: forgive and care like that] Should you not also have had mercy on your fellow slave, in the same way that I had mercy on you? (Mt 18:33)*

That kind of care should mark our prayer: 'forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors'

But what about v. 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.* Again this is confusing but there's also a caring note: treat her as a daughter and make sure she's cared for. Unlike male slaves, there's extra care, protections, provision to redeem or release

Selling kids or 2nd marriages isn't God's will or ideal, but if men did, God cared for those affected

Our culture recoils at arranged marriages or dowry payment or designating people to be married. But this was a culture with betrothal and big bride investments that a family in poverty might need early. Marriage had a price paid in ancient times, and right or wrong, her dad received it and could negotiate it. Like an early inheritance, it's not a normal or ideal thing, but in desperation and destitution some sought out early payment for a wedding. If the master broke faith and didn't care for her, she's redeemed (v. 8b NAS *'because of his unfairness to her'*).

The man forfeited any authority or right with her if he didn't treat her right and fair with care

v. 7 isn't demeaning, the Heb 'maidservant' is how Ruth spoke of herself asking for marital covering.⁷ A scholar explains 'probably prompted by a financial crisis within the family. The money... comes in lieu of the betrothal present [normally given her dad] at the time of his daughter's marriage... a dowry ...[maybe not] possible in a time of poverty. While this arrangement obviously benefited a family in debt, the rulings in vv. 7-11 seek to safeguard the position of the girl, who has lost the immediate protection of her family... v. 9 reveals... she must be treated according to 'the rulings of daughters'... viewed as having a status well above that of an ordinary slave... treated with the respect due to every free woman within the Israelite society of her time... [and] allowed to go if the situation is bad... v. 11 clarifies what action is to be taken against... breaking any of these rulings... the girl is to go free.'⁸

First the rights of daughter, then marital rights, which maybe best translated “provide, take care of, attend to the needs of”...could be rendered “care, concern” [he translates as] “her upkeep.”⁹ If there’s another woman involved, he must care for all her needs or she’s free (think Abraham, Hagar). Gen 1-2 is God’s will and ideal: 1-man-1-woman-for-life, but sin messes that up (Gen 16, 21). God in His care gives regulations for unfortunate situations (polygamy, divorce, abuse, etc.). God speaks in Exodus to correct what went badly in Genesis and protect those in bad situations. Slavery in Ex 21 is in laws on killing, cursing parents, hitting pregnant ladies (not good or God’s way). God isn’t pro-slavery anymore than those other things in this chapter He doesn’t condone. He cares for all and calls us to care

God’s ancient law shows He cares for women more than modern feminists

Good law protects women from bad men and keeps providing for her needs (or should). God’s law alone in all ancient law gave slaves a day off for rest and worship (Ex 20:8-11).¹⁰ Slaves were last and least in other law codes (some not at all) but 1st in God’s law. God puts rights of slaves first in a world that gave them no rights, to care for those the world didn’t. 21:26-27 uses the same Hebrew word as v. 7, if a slave girl was abused, God’s law set her free. Any slave who was in a bad situation also had the option to flee to others for refuge. Dt 23:15: *If a slave has taken refuge with you, do not hand him over to his master. ¹⁶ Let him live among you wherever he likes and in whatever town he chooses. Do not oppress him.* This is radically different than all other ancient near east law. ‘The Laws of Hammurabi demanded capital punishment for anyone who enabled a slave to escape or harbored a fugitive.’¹¹ But the law of a holy good made that a compassionate duty and a way for any slave to get out of a bad situation with full support of God’s people. Think of refugees today, oppressed in need of refuge, safety. I pray our church will always be a safe place for those abused or misused, pregnant but no man, single moms, etc.

May some in our midst be used in some way to help rescued trafficked girls, today’s slave-trade

That takes us to #3. This concept points us to redemption (and spiritual slavery, next week)

Main point is *redeeming/freeing/going out* (those verbs 8x but the noun *slave* only 4x). Exodus is a book about redemption (paying to buy back). In Ex 4 He calls slaves ‘*my son*’ to bring home. In Ex 21:9 a master was to treat a slave as a child. 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.*

So his ear was pierced at the doorway of the home, as if nailed to wood, leaving blood and nail-prints. Remember when God redeemed slaves in Egypt at Passover? There was blood on the doorpost. It was ultimately pointing to the coming Redeemer, the Lamb of God and His blood on the cross. Isaiah uses this same word slave/ebed to prophesy Jesus, ebed-Yahweh, bondservant of the Lord.¹² He voluntarily temporarily took on the form of a slave under His heavenly Lord to do His work.¹³ Jesus plainly spoke love for God the Master and His family. The church is His bride man rejected but He redeemed. To His Father He calls us ‘*the children you have given me.*’¹⁴ He was sold by Judas the price of a slave and He died on the cross the death of a slave. He’s the model of loving obedience to the master, loving family we don’t want to be free of. Jesus is my Master forever. I say with Peter¹⁵ where else will I go, He has the words of life! For us He is the door¹⁶ and He brings us to God and He bore our debt of sin to a cross

Can you say plainly ‘I love my Master’? Do you want to serve as ‘His slave forever’?

If you don’t yet love Him, come to Him and confess Him as your Lord (Master). Trust we had a debt we could not pay, and Jesus paid a debt He did not owe to free us from sin. We had no resources and would have died unless He agreed to provide all our needs. He pays our way and takes us to stay with Him and live with Him not just for 6 years, but forever. At Christmas think of Christ coming into this world among the poor, the homeless and helpless. Long lay the world in sin and the errors of slavery.

Till He appeared...He taught us to love one another, His law is love and His gospel is peace

Chains shall He break for the slave is our brother, and in His name all oppression shall cease

...He knows our need, to our weakness is no stranger, Behold your King! Before Him lowly bend!¹⁷

¹ Charles Haddon Spurgeon, *The New Park Street Pulpit*, vol. 6 (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994), 155.

² [The Bible Condemns American Slavery | The CrippleGate](#)

For other concerns with Doug Wilson, see [On Culture War, Doug Wilson, and the Moscow Mood | Kevin DeYoung \(clearlyreformed.org\)](#)

³ Question 142.

⁴ Revelation 18:12, 17-19 ESV.

⁵ Victor P. Hamilton, *Exodus: An Exegetical Commentary* (Baker, 2011), 368.

⁶ Matthew 18:25-33 NASB.

⁷ Ruth 3:9, Hebrew *amah*, different than *ebed* in v. 2. This word “maidservant” from Exodus 21:7 is also how other honorable free women identified themselves, like Hannah (1 Samuel 1:11, 16), Abigail (1 Samuel 25:25-31), cf. Mary in Luke 1:38 (Greek version).

⁸ T. Desmond Alexander, *Exodus*, Apollos Old Testament Commentary (InterVarsity Press, 2017), 2:476–479.

⁹ Hamilton, 370.

¹⁰ “Among all the ancient Near Eastern laws known to us, only those of Israel give workers the right to free time for worship and recreation.”— David Baker, *The Humanisation of Slavery in the Old Testament* (Wipf and Stock, 2015), 15.

¹¹ Baker, 16-17.

¹² See Isaiah 42:19 that first seems to use this phrase of Israel, but then more clearly used of Israel’s representative and Redeemer to come in 52:13, 53:11, etc. For slave imagery in context, see 50:1-2, 5-6, 52:3, 13, 54:5-8, 58:6, 61:1-3, 62:4-5, etc.

¹³ Translated ‘bond-servant’ in Philippians 2:7 NASB, or more literally and precisely ‘slave’ in LSB, HCSB.

¹⁴ Hebrews 2:13.

¹⁵ John 6:67-68.

¹⁶ John 10:9.

¹⁷ John Dwight, “O Holy Night.”