

Message #40

Exodus 21:1-11

We come now to a continuation of the O.T. Law, which gives us a series of “ordinances.” This is all part of the O.T. Law. This part of the Law gives a series of laws that were designed to govern and guide the behavior of Israel, God’s covenant nation.

Now this first part of the Law starts with a focus on the treatment of human beings. Specifically, this part of the O.T. Law starts by presenting laws pertaining to human beings who could be mistreated and abused the most and that would be the slaves.

Now slaves were a fact of life when the O.T. was written. In fact, the Hebrew words translated “servant,” “slave” or “maidservant” are used more than 1000 times in the Old Testament. The normal word that is used for “slave” (ebed) means a servant or slave and it may also be used in a context of a worker or laborer (William Gesenius, *Hebrew Lexicon*, pp. 559-600).

During this time there were no businesses or corporations who hired people. Almost all of the businesses were what we would call “small businesses” in the sense that they were family owned and family operated. The “servant/slaves” in the O.T. context were humans who were owned by masters and they needed work and because they worked for a master, they could be exploited. They did not have much and they did not run companies so they were subject to the masters who owned them. So God begins with a series of laws that apply to them.

What these slave laws did was to give employees and employers certain rights. The Egyptians had mistreated Israel by forcing Israel into horrible slave labor situations, and God’s Law protected that from happening in His people and nation.

Now there were various kinds of slaves in the O.T..

- 1) There were foreign-born slaves whose lives had been spared in war on the condition that they would become permanent workers in Israel (Josh. 9:23; I Sam. 4:9).
- 2) There were six-year servant slaves, who worked for an employer for six years in return for wages and benefits.
- 3) There were servant-born slaves, who were born into a master’s house, who owed the master something for providing housing and wages and care.
- 4) There were temporary slaves or servants who worked for a master for a temporary period of time (maybe even one day) for wages.

GOD ESTABLISHES SPECIFIC ORDINANCES AND LAWS FOR ISRAEL THAT COVER THE WAY SLAVES ARE TO BE TREATED.

Verse 1 begins by saying that He is giving Moses “ordinances” (mispatim) which are regulations, statutes that he was to present to Israel. So these are specific regulations for Israel that comprise the O.T. Law.

I find it very interesting that one of the first topics God addresses is the topic of master/slave; employer/employee relationships. God wants people to work and there needs to be fair treatment of workers who do work. There needs to be a humane atmosphere. It was expected that every person, including a slave, was to be treated with respect and dignity.

Slavery was a part of life in this economy and these were the laws designed to govern slave labor. There are two main labor ordinances given in this text:

LABOR ORDINANCE #1 – There is to be a time limit and regulations for Hebrew male slaves one purchases. **21:2-6**

There was to be a term limit pertaining to the employment of a servant/slave. There was to be a contractual arrangement for a Hebrew slave.

If an owner purchased a Hebrew slave, the slave was to work for him for six years and he was to be set free in year seven without any payment whatsoever. In fact, if a master actually struck a slave and injured him, that slave was to be set free (Ex. 21:26-27).

Now do you really think the United States of America practiced obeying the O.T. Law in the southern states when it came to slavery? Do you think that every seventh year they set their slaves free? Do you think that if they hit a slave and hurt a slave they let him go? We have not even followed the Law of God on this slave matter.

Now the idea of “buying” a slave is the idea of paying a sum of money for a slave. The question is to whom is the money paid for the slave? There are a couple of possibilities:

The money was typically paid to the slave. A free slave would negotiate some financial deal with a master to provide for his needs and the needs of his family and then go to work for a master. He apparently could negotiate either some lump sum payment or some long term payment plan to cover his expense needs over a six-year period.

If some other master owned a slave that someone else wanted, there needed to be a calculation of the total wage package and it needed to be pro-rated and repaid to owner in the price of redemption (Lev. 25:48-50).

A Hebrew slave would make a six-year deal with an owner. The slave would agree to work for a master in exchange for food, housing, clothing, medical needs and some money.

Now the specific time limit was six years and on the seventh year that slave could go free and not pay the owner anything (**v. 2**).

Now there were at least four personal legal aspects that governed this slave labor ordinance:

Legal Aspect #1 - When his six-year term is up, if he was alone he shall leave alone. **21:3a**

Legal Aspect #2 - When his six-year term is up, if he had a wife when he hired on, she shall leave with him when he leaves. **21:3b**

Obviously if the slave had a wife when he went to work for a master, the master agreed to that when he took that particular slave. She was part of the package deal that the master had agreed to so at the end of the six years, both could go free.

Legal Aspect #3 - When his six-year term is up, if the master gave him a wife while he was serving him and she had children, both the wife and the children belonged to the master and must stay with the master. **21:4**

Now we may read between the lines on this a little bit. If a master actually gave a slave a wife, it is clear that he liked the slave and was giving him an extra perk on the job (especially if she had a good personality and was not some nut). So a slave would need to think through whether or not he wanted to be free at the end of six years or stay on and work for the master when his term was over.

Now suppose that a slave wanted to be free, but he also wanted his wife and children. If he left to be free, did this mean that he would never see his wife and children again? No way. There were at least three possible options:

(Option #1) - He could go to work somewhere else and wait for his wife and children to fulfill a six-year work assignment.

(Option #2) - He could go to work for someone else, earn enough money to purchase his wife and children and buy out the remaining contract.

(Option #3) - He could willingly decide to stay with the master keeping himself and his family working for this master for the rest of their lives.

We have many people in the military who sign on for a two or four-year period and then some, when they have completed their assignment decide to sign on permanently.

Legal Aspect #4 - When his six-year term is up and the slave loves his master, wife and children, he may make a decision to not go free and he may become a permanent slave of his master. **21:5-6**

Now it is clear that God was in this work setting and He monitored all of this. If a slave truly wanted to unite with a master forever, this was not a light or impulsive decision. This was not some rash decision. Let's say a slave said I want to retire working for this family. It was serious.

This was to be carried out by a ritual before God that required the presence of both the master and the slave. Both the master and slave were required to go to the door of the sacred place of worship—tabernacle and then temple. The owner was to pierce the earlobe of the slave and that would become a permanent visible sign that this slave had willingly agreed to work for this master forever.

This mark would prevent any slave from changing his mind and running away and trying to get employment with another master because the master would recognize the mark in the ear.

LABOR ORDINANCE #2 – There are legal regulations for female Hebrew slaves that one purchases. **21:7-11**

This may seem to be an uneasy topic, but the fact is it is assumed that there will be a sexual connection between men and women. The way God designed it, men were the bread earners and the women were the child bearers. The man went to work and earned a living and the woman stayed home and took care of the home and the children. All of this is assumed in these ordinances that pertain to the woman. God never wanted any of His women mistreated and he obviously monitored how they were treated.

There are at least five regulations regarding the purchase of a Hebrew female slave:

Legal Regulation #1 - If a father sells his Hebrew daughter as a slave, she shall not automatically go free after six years. **21:7**

Some fathers would spot a very caring owner and he would rather have his daughter affiliated with a nice caring owner than some ruthless individual. So he would negotiate some deal for his daughter.

Legal Regulation #2 - If the owner of a Hebrew slave was not pleased with the slave he had purchased for himself, he could not sell her to a foreign master, but he could let the father redeem her. **21:8**

Legal Regulation #3 - If the owner of a Hebrew slave designated her for his son he must deal with her according to the regulations concerning daughters. **21:9**

In China it is still possible to buy a daughter for your son as a wife. You negotiate a deal with the daughter's family and pay the dowry price. If a daughter had a good father, he certainly would look the family over who wanted his daughter.

Legal Regulation #4 - If the owner of a Hebrew slave took another woman, he cannot reduce her rights. **21:10**

There were three specific rights that she had and the master was required to supply these things:

- 1) She had a right to have food;
- 2) She had a right to have clothing;
- 3) She had a right to have physical intimacy.

Legal Regulation #5 - If the owner of a Hebrew slave does decide to reduce her rights, she shall go free. **21:11**

When you think this through, there were three options:

- 1) A woman could become the wife of a master.
- 2) A woman could become the wife of a master's son.
- 3) A woman could be set free by redemption.

Now every bit of this is a picture of us. Every bit of this picture pertains to every male and every female and it also pertains to Jesus Christ.

Every one of us is a slave to sin. Jesus Christ came into this world and He could have gone out free because He never sinned. He could have gone back to heaven as free as a bird. But He loved us and He saw us in our sin enslaved condition and He paid the full price to redeem every man and every woman, every boy and every girl in order to set us free.

Now let me ask you a question. Do you really want to go back under the Law?