

## Exodus 21:1-11

**I. Exodus 21:1** — Now these are the rules that you shall set before them.

The first thing we need to see here is privilege and joy. What are these rules? The Hebrew word for rules (*mispātim*) has the idea of “righteous judgments.” And so these rules – or these righteous judgments – are simply the application and the outworking of the terms of the **Covenant** in the Ten Commandments. And what is the Covenant? The Covenant is the formal means by which God of the universe is entering into **relationship** with the people that He has chosen by His grace. So as the application of the Ten Commandments – as the outworking of the terms of the Covenant – what are these rules doing? These “rules” are defining and setting the boundaries of a relationship with Yahweh. A relationship with no expectations – a relationship with no boundaries – **is no relationship at all**. But then what we have to remember here is that these rules are not setting the boundaries for a relationship between two equal parties (like a husband and wife), but a relationship between sinful man and a holy God. So can you see it now? The fact that the holy God is graciously revealing these rules – these boundaries for relationship – should be seen by us as a wonderful privilege and cause for indescribable joy. Listen to the Psalmist in Psalm 119:

- Psalm 119:7, 13, 20 — I will praise you with an upright heart, when I learn your righteous rules... With my lips I declare all the rules of your mouth... My soul is consumed with longing for your rules at all times...

Remember, if the terms and conditions and rules came to us outside of Covenant, they could only, ever minister death and judgment. But when these same terms and conditions and rules are “set before [us]” within the context of Covenant, now they can always be seen as an expression of God’s immeasurable love and grace. Do we see all of God’s rules as only “wonderful privilege” and cause for deep down joy?

“Now these are the rules that you shall set before them...”

**II. Exodus 21:2a** — When you buy a Hebrew slave...

Maybe our first response to these words goes something like this: “What?!? ‘When you buy a Hebrew slave’? Shouldn’t God be saying, ‘You shall not buy a Hebrew slave?’” Notice first of all that these “rules” regarding slaves are the very first rules that God sets before the people of Israel – the very first righteous judgments and applications of the terms of the covenant. So why are these rules about slaves the “first”? The first thing we’re probably all thinking about is that the entire nation of Israel has just been rescued from being a nation of slaves in Egypt. Slavery was something every Israelite knew about from his or her own extensive and personal experience. So this is the first thing we need to understand: The very first rules that God gives to Israel will have to do with the institution of slavery **seen in the light** of their own recent experience as slaves in the land of Egypt. This is essential.

Notice what Yahweh says: “When you buy a **Hebrew** slave.” Now in the Bible, “Hebrew” is not a common word. It’s used only thirty-five times, and it almost always refers to Jews *from the*

*perspective* of Gentile foreigners. If you were a Jew, it wasn't likely that you were going to refer to another Jew as a Hebrew. This was a word used most often by Gentiles.

- Genesis 39:14–17 — [Potiphar's wife said], "See, [Potiphar] has brought among us a Hebrew to laugh at us..." Then she... told [Potiphar] the same story, saying, "The Hebrew servant, whom you have brought among us, came in to me to laugh at me."
- 1 Samuel 14:11 (cf. 4:9) — The Philistines said, "Look, Hebrews are coming out of the holes where they have hidden themselves."

Or if "Hebrew" is used by a Jew, it's likely being used only in conversation with a Gentile foreigner:

- Genesis 40:15 — [Joseph said to his fellow Egyptian prisoner:] For I was indeed stolen out of the land of the Hebrews..."
- Jonah 1:9 — [Jonah] said to [the Gentile sailors], "I am a Hebrew, and I fear the LORD, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land."

Now, can you guess the one place in the Bible where the word "Hebrew" is used the greatest number of times? It's right here in Exodus, in the first ten chapters (13 x's), in the context of Israel's enslavement to the Egyptians. (Exod. 1:15, 16, 19; 2:6, 7, 11, 13; 3:18; 5:3; 7:16; 9:1, 13; 10:3) So in light of all this, what are we meant to think when Yahweh says to His people: "When you [a Jew] buy a **Hebrew** slave"? That word "Hebrew," in this context, doesn't seem to fit. But, in fact, this is actually one of **three** passages where Jewish slaves to Jewish masters are specifically referred to as "Hebrews." (cf. Deut. 15:12; Jer. 34:9, 14) In Deuteronomy, Moses reminds the people of these very rules about slavery right here in Exodus 21, and then this is what he says:

- Deuteronomy 15:15 — 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 today.

So now maybe *you* can read and then feel for yourself the meaning and significance of these words and their placement at the **very beginning** of the Book of the Covenant: "When you buy a Hebrew slave..." Everything that follows is **meant** to be seen **in contrast** with the slavery that the Israelites had just experienced at the hands of the Egyptians. The Egyptians **forced** the Israelites into perpetual slavery. As slaves, the Israelites had zero rights and could be beaten, abused, and killed at the whim of their masters. This reminds us of the only thing we ever think about when we hear the word "slave" or "slavery." How can we not think of people being kidnapped from their homes and lands, transported in chains to an entirely different continent, and then sold or auctioned off to masters in a land where they had no legal or even human rights whatsoever. The Bible isn't ignorant about this kind of slavery. To the contrary, all the rules that God gives to His people concerning slavery are meant to be seen in stark **contrast** with this precise kind of slavery that they themselves had experienced at the hands of the Egyptians.

The Hebrew word for "slave" is *ebed* (*eveth*). *Eveth* can actually mean lots of different things. It can mean slave, or servant, or even worshiper, and it can describe lots of different "categories" of slavery or servanthood. *Eveth* can refer to a person who is treated abusively and has no legal

rights at all, or that same Hebrew word can also refer to someone who holds a very powerful and influential position in the king's court (as a counselor and servant of the king). And then, of course, *eveth* can also refer to anything and everything in the middle. So it's always the *context* that has to tell us how the word is being used and what it means in each place. What's assumed here in Exodus 21 is a Jewish man who becomes poor and is forced to sell himself into slavery in order to satisfy his debts and provide for himself and his family if he has one. (cf. Lev. 25:39) Now we *could* say that he's selling his *services* (he's not actually selling himself *as a soul or a person* to be *no more* than an object or a piece of property). That's true, but the only problem is that to say he's selling his services might imply that he's really just like a modern day "employee" who goes to work every day for a paycheck, and then goes back home to live his own life. But that's not what's happening here either. There is a sense here in which the entire life of this man is now to be lived entirely in the service and at the discretion of his new master.<sup>1</sup> But on the positive side, one thing this also means is that the servant is now essentially a member of the master's *household*. No, he's not a *son*, but he's still a part of the household, and he can now expect to be provided with food, clothing, shelter, and all the basic benefits of life in the household. (cf. Deut. 12:12; 16:14) And so as a *part* of the household in the capacity of a slave, it was the legitimate *right* of the master to discipline his slave with the rod (cf. Exod. 21:20-21) just as he could also discipline his son with the rod. (Prov. 13:24; 22:15; 23:13-14; 29:15) Again, we see that this is no modern-day employee. And yet we also see that slavery in Israel is not in any way the same thing as the slavery of Egypt. The people of Israel were not *ever* to bring their brothers into the same kind of slavery that God Himself had redeemed them *out of*. (cf. Lev. 25:39-43, 46b) And so we go on to read in verse two:

**III. Exodus 21:2** — When you buy a Hebrew slave, he shall serve six years, and in the seventh he shall go out free, for nothing.

So when it came to Hebrew slaves, there were to be slave "term limits" of six years. (cf. Jer. 34:8-22) There was actually another culture in Israel's day where the same kind of slavery had *three-year* term limits. But the six-year term limits in Israel with release in the seventh year is patterned after the Sabbath rest. So instead of Israel's longer term limits being more strict or "harsh," it's actually a beautiful sign and reminder of God's own redeeming protection and care for the slaves. Remember the fourth commandment which we've already seen in Exodus twenty:

- Exodus 20:10 — The seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God. On it you shall not do any work, you, or your son, or your daughter, *your male servant, or your female servant*, or your livestock, or the sojourner who is within your gates.

In Deuteronomy, Moses talks about Israel's celebration of the various Sabbatical feasts and festivals:

- Deuteronomy 12:12 (cf. 12:18; 16:11, 14) — You shall rejoice before the LORD your God, you and your sons and your daughters, *your male servants and your female servants*, and the Levite that is within your towns, since he has no portion or inheritance with you.

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<sup>1</sup> Even when the servant is in society is now completely dependent on his master's social status. (Schultz; NIDOT)

So after six years, in the seventh or “Sabbath” year, the Hebrew slave was to walk out of his master’s service free, without any payment of a redemption price. You see, if the slave somehow acquired the means to buy his freedom before the six years were up, he could. Or if one of his family members was able to purchase his freedom, this was also allowed. (cf. Lev. 25:47-55) But if not, when the seventh year came, there was to be no purchasing of anything. He had served his time, and now he was allowed to go out free, without payment *in the seventh year*. This was a beautiful picture of God’s gracious desire that even the *slaves* among His people should one day share with Him in His own eternal day of Sabbath rest. In fact, in the parallel passage in Deuteronomy, this is what we read:

- Deuteronomy 15:13–14, 18 — And when you let him go free from you, you shall not let him go empty-handed. You shall furnish him liberally out of your flock, out of your threshing floor, and out of your winepress. As the LORD your God has blessed you, you shall give to him... It shall not seem hard to you when you let him go free from you, for at half the cost of a hired worker he has served you six years. So the LORD your God will bless you in all that you do.

Here we see very clearly that every master’s treatment of his slave is to be connected with his own personal experience of God’s undeserved blessing on his life. This was very different from all the surrounding cultures. This wasn’t just about being “humane,” it was about reflecting the character, and the goodness, and the nature of the God who had redeemed His people from *out of* the cruel and oppressive slavery in Egypt. We go on to read in verses 3-4:

**IV. Exodus 21:3–4** — If he comes in single, he shall go out single; if he comes in married, then his wife shall go out with him. 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.

OK, now here are some verses where I’m just going to have to say to all of us: “Get over it.” Our modern ideas and sensibilities here are not to be imposed on ANE culture. First of all, we can’t absolutely be positive about all the details, and there’s a lot that we just don’t know. Second of all, whatever these verses are saying, they can’t undermine or contradict what we’ve already seen of God’s character and ways in the rules already laid down. And thirdly, we can be sure that no one in Israel’s day was complaining. There was no slave who would have thought this rule unjust or unfair. There were no protests being organized, and there would have been absolutely no legitimate desires by anyone to do so. So today, we in western, 21<sup>st</sup> century America just need to get over it.

Now, if a man’s master gave him a *Jewish* slave-woman as his wife, my understanding is that her husband could either purchase his wife’s freedom early or wait until her six years were up before she was released from her master’s household and could then join her husband. (cf. Deut. 15:12-18) But what I think it’s likely we have here is a slave-woman who is *not* a Hebrew. We read in Leviticus:

- Leviticus 25:44–46a — You may buy male and female slaves from among the nations that are around you. You may also buy from among the strangers who sojourn with you... who

have been born in your land, and they may be your property. You may bequeath them to your sons after you to inherit as a possession forever.

Now these “Gentile” slaves were still to be treated with fairness and dignity as members of the household,<sup>2</sup> but they had no legal rights to be released in the seventh year. So if a master gave a foreign born slave-woman to be the wife of his male slave, that slave woman along with her children by this new marriage still belonged by rights more to the master than to the man she had been given to as a husband. One commentator writes: “This may appear oppressive, but it was an equitable consequence of the possession of property in slaves at all.” (Keil) Now, of course, we have to remember that no male slave was ever forced to marry, and every male slave would have been aware of this law so he could make a fully informed decision. We also have to remember that we simply don’t know all the details. When the man went out free and left his wife and children as the permanent members of his former master’s household, did this mean she was no longer his wife? It would *seem* so, but I’m not absolutely convinced. There’s just so much that’s foreign to us, and so many details that aren’t clearly explained. But in reality, given all of the righteous rules and judgments concerning slavery, it was not at all unlikely that a man would *rather* stay on *permanently* (along with his wife and children) as a slave member of his master’s household. And so we read in verses 5-6:

**V. Exodus 21:5-6** — But if the slave plainly says, ‘I love [am committed to] my master, my wife, and my children; I will not go out free,’ 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.

This piercing of the ear wasn’t an inhumane “branding.” It was a sign of the slave’s own free and voluntary choice to stay on for the rest of his life as a slave in the household of his master. So now we go on to read in verses 7-11:

**VI. Exodus 21:7-11** — When a man sells his daughter as a slave, she shall not go out as the male slaves do. 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. If he designates her for his son, he shall deal with her as with a daughter. If he takes another wife to himself, he shall not diminish her food, her clothing, or her marital rights. And if he does not do these three things for her, she shall go out for nothing, without payment of money.

So there are a couple of things we need to say here. Number one: Get over it. I’m serious about that. It’s *important*. This whole thing is foreign to us, but let’s not be arrogant and snobbish 21<sup>st</sup> century westerners. When a man sold his daughter as a slave, the assumption seems to be that she would also become her master’s wife (or concubine), or else the wife of her master’s son. (This is why she wouldn’t “go out” as the male slaves did.) So in this way, the father is paid not

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<sup>2</sup> Exodus 12:44 — Every [foreign?] slave that is bought for money may eat of [the Passover] after you have circumcised him.

Deuteronomy 23:15-16 — “You shall not give up to his [abusive?] master a [foreign?] slave who has escaped from his master to you. He shall dwell with you, in your midst, in the place that he shall choose within one of your towns, wherever it suits him. You shall not wrong him.

only the girl's bride price (her dowry), but also the price for her services as a slave (or perhaps the father's debts are simply cancelled). On the other hand, the father has also gained for his daughter a secure position as a member in another Israelite's household, protected by all of God's righteous judgments and rules. Notice the **obvious emphasis** in these verses on guaranteeing the protection and welfare of this Israelite daughter who's been sold as a slave into another Israelite household! There's no reason to assume that in making this decision, the father has not actually been looking out for the very *best* interests of his daughter.

Notice these two provisions especially: "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*... he shall not diminish her food, her clothing, or her marital rights. *And if he does not do these three things for her*, she shall go out for nothing, without payment of money." Here's an example of two righteous judgments, or rules, that are given only because of Israel's "hardness of heart." (cf. Mat. 19:7-8) Remember that under the Old Covenant the offspring *singular* was not regenerate – it was a mixed community of true believers and a whole lot of idol-worshippers. And so some of the laws and rules were "concessions" intended to regulate and reign in the actual realities of an offspring *singular* with hearts still made of stone. There are no laws or rules of this kind under the New Covenant where the offspring *singular* is all born again. But under the Old Covenant these rules were necessary and good, and kind and compassionate – always intended to watch out for the welfare and protection of the most vulnerable among God's chosen people.

## **Conclusion**

So what have we seen this morning? We've seen that the righteous judgments of God concerning slavery in Israel are meant to be understood in stark *contrast* with the kind of slavery that the Israelites experienced at the hands of the Egyptians. But we've seen more than this. We've seen that these rules are meant to be the most fully understood *in light of* God's redemption and *liberation* of every Israelite man, woman, and child from *out of* their slavery in Egypt. Even the slaves are members of God's covenant people whom He has redeemed, and liberated, and freed.

But maybe for us, this still just feels like a *contradiction* in terms. After all, how can any form of slavery, no matter how "humane," ever be reconciled with Israel's *liberation* from slavery in Egypt? How can we ever view the one "approvingly" in light of the other? And so we might wish for even stricter laws. It may feel to us like God's righteous rules aren't quite righteous enough. Couldn't God have given His people some kind of system to eliminate any place at all for the institution of slavery? Maybe we can't help but feel like what God should have said is this: "You *shall not* buy a Hebrew slave." But the answer to all of this is really quite simple, and it really only convicts us of unbiblical, and perhaps even sinful thinking.

What we need to remember is this: The Israelites were liberated from one master (the Egyptians) only in order that they might "serve" (the verbal form of the Hebrew word for slave) of a different master – Yahweh.

- Exodus 4:22–23 (cf. 7:16; 8:1, 20; 9:1, 13; 10:3) — Then you shall say to Pharaoh, ‘Thus says the LORD, Israel is my firstborn son, and I say to you, “Let my son go that he may *serve* [*avath*] me.’”

In other words, the Israelites were not simply “set free.” If that was all that happened, then it’s true that any kind of “slavery” would be totally incompatible with this reality. But the Israelites were set free from one master ***only in order that*** they might learn the service of a different Master. Therefore, slavery is not necessarily a contradiction of God’s liberation of His people. This explains why even in the New Testament, under the New Covenant, Christian masters are never commanded to set their slaves free, and neither is it ever assumed that they should, or would.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, even today we have all been set free from the master of sin and death ***only in order that*** we might become “*slaves* of righteousness” – “*slaves* of God.” (Rom. 6:16-22)

“Slavery,” depending on how it’s defined and practiced according to the culture and the times, is not in and of itself a contradiction of our redemption and our liberation as God’s people. And to argue differently is not at all biblical thinking, but rather the secular, humanistic thinking of modern western culture that exalts the freedom, and independence, and autonomy of man even against the sovereign claims of our Creator, Owner, and rightful Master.

So how well do we understand the meaning and implications of our status as bond-*slaves* of God? On the one hand, this is truly an exalted position. On the other hand, according to all of today’s thinking, this can only be insulting, inhumane, and unacceptable – along with any other human institution that threatens individual “freedom” and autonomy. The institution of slavery has actually caused me to ask myself: “How has the spirit of the age infected the thinking of the Church? (“Liberation Theology”) The institution of slavery has caused me to ask *myself*: “How has the spirit of the age infected my own thinking?” Depending on the culture, and the times, and the righteous judgments of God, would I be ***fully content*** to be the *slave* of another man precisely because I have understood my liberation from sin and death only in order to be the bond-slave of God? Exactly ***how*** seriously have I taken these words of the Apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians:

- 1 Corinthians 6:19–20 — You are not your own, for you were bought with a price.

Paul writes in the very next chapter:

- 1 Corinthians 7:21–24 — Were you a bondservant when called? Do not be concerned about it. (But if you can gain your freedom, avail yourself of the opportunity.) For he who was called in the Lord as a bondservant is a freedman of the Lord. Likewise he who was free when called is a bondservant of Christ. You were bought with a price; do not become bondservants of men [don’t view yourselves as no more than slaves of men]. So, brothers, in whatever condition each was called, ***there let him remain with God.***

The Bible teaches me, then, that my enslavement to another man does not contradict my freedom in Christ, but is only to be lived out in light of that freedom. On the other hand, my freedom in

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<sup>3</sup> For New Testament teaching with respect to the institution of slavery, see: 1 Cor. 12:13; Gal. 3:28; Eph. 6:5–9; Col. 3:10–11; 3:22–4:1; 1 Tim 6:1–2; Titus 2:9–10; Philemon 15–16; 1 Pet. 2:18–19

society (the freedom that we all experience today) must not be allowed to undermine the reality of my enslavement to God, but is only and always to be lived out in light of that “enslavement.” And so, in the end, the Gospel is fully compatible with both “freedom” and “slavery.” (contrary to the lies of “Liberation Theology”) In fact, it’s the Gospel that “*redeems*” both of these realities (*both* freedom and slavery) – *both* of which would otherwise be only the expressions of our sinful rebellion. In the end, what does my “feeling” about the human institution of slavery reveal about my understanding of the *actual, full* extent of my (glad) “enslavement” to God?

- 1 Corinthians 6:19–20 — Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God? You are not your own, for you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body. [As those who are at the same time both freed men and women (cf. Gal. 5:1) **and** “slaves” of God.]