

Pastor Jeremy M. Thomas
Fredericksburg Bible Church
107 East Austin
Fredericksburg, Texas 78624
830-997-8834 jthomas@fbgbible.org

C0634 – September 13, 2006 – Ex 21:1-11 – Slaves, & Handmaids

The People's Response (20:18-21)

After the people saw God and heard Him speak they ran away. They feared God in the wrong sense. Moses encouraged them to fear God in the proper sense; to have a reverential awe and respect for His character. Seeing the visible manifestation of God in the Shechinah Glory would develop this fear and keep them from sinning.

The Ordinance of the Altar (20:22-26)

The 'Book of the Covenant' is proposed beginning in 20:22 with the prohibition of idolatry and ending in 23:33 with the prohibition of idolatry. No image was to be made of the invisible God. If they would obey the commandments in this 'Book' it would guard them against idolatry. If they disobeyed it would lead them to idolatry. Sin always leads to idolatry. Rather than making idols of Him they should make simple earthen altars for Him. The priests should offer sin offerings on the altar. They should do so fully clothed and not naked so as to symbolize the covering of their sinfulness (20:22-26).

III. The Ordinances Regarding Slaves (21:1-6)

¹ "Now these are the ordinances which you are to set before them:

An **ordinance** (*mishpat*) is not a law in the usual sense but a "right". The people of Israel had "rights" that needed to be respected. This is, therefore, Israel's "Bill of Rights". Each ordinance which follows amplifies one of the Ten Commandments.

² "If you buy a Hebrew slave, he shall serve for six years; but on the seventh he shall go out as a free man without payment.

³ "**If he comes alone, he shall go out alone; if he is the husband of a wife, 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 belong to her master, 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 as a free man,'**

⁶ **then his master shall bring him to God, then he shall bring him to the door or the doorpost. And his master shall pierce his ear with an awl; and he shall serve him permanently.**

This is the first *casuistic law* in the Book of the Covenant. Casuistic or case law is expressed in the form "if so and so happens then so and so". God gave the Israelites a set of case law. The basic case concerning Hebrew Men Slaves is found in verse 2 and four secondary cases which deal with other possible details are cited in verses 3-6.

A **If you buy a Hebrew slave, he shall serve for six years**

A' **If he comes alone, he shall go out alone**

A'' **If he is the husband of a wife, then his wife shall go out with him.**

A''' **If his master gives him a wife he shall go out alone**

A'''' **If the slave will not go out as a free man he shall serve him permanently**

The basic law is that "As a man is when he sells himself into slavery so he shall go out after six years." This is the basic law, "As he comes so he goes". **If you buy a Hebrew slave**, that is, if a Hebrew bought a person categorized as a Hebrew slave, then **he shall serve for six years** as a Hebrew slave, that is, without pay, **but on the seventh he shall go out as a free man without payment** or debt. How did one become a Hebrew slave? If a Hebrew mismanaged his property and went into debt or was in poverty he could market himself as a slave. This was voluntary slavery and not forced slavery. The system was set up so the voluntary slave could pay off his debt and return to society a **free man**. The slave system did not violate the slaves volition. **Six years** was the maximum amount of time a **Hebrew slave** must **serve**.

Verse 3a, **If he comes alone, he shall go out alone**. That is, if, at the moment he sold himself into slavery he was **alone**, then after the six years of service **he shall go out alone**. As he came so he goes.

Verse 3b, **If he is the husband of a wife, then his wife shall go out with him.** That is, if, at the moment he sold himself into slavery he was the **husband of a wife, then** after the six years of service **his wife shall go out with him.** As he came so he goes.

Verse 4, **If his master gives him a wife,** that is, during his six years of service, **and she bears him sons or daughters,** during this six years of service, then **the wife and her children shall belong to her master, and he shall go out alone.** As he came so he goes. The **wife** was given to him by **his master**, therefore, the **sons or daughters she bears...belong to her master.** The man **shall go out alone.** However, a provision is made in verses 5-6 for a slave who, of his own volition, refuses to **go out alone.**

Verses 5-6, **If the slave plainly says, 'I love my master, my wife and my children; I will not go out as a free man,'⁶ then his master shall bring him to God, then he shall bring him to the door or the doorpost. And his master shall pierce his ear with an awl; and he shall serve him permanently.** Again, the volition of the individual was respected. Slavery was voluntary and the release was voluntary. If, after six years of service, at the time of release, he did not want to be a free man, but wanted to remain enslaved because he loved his master, his wife and his children, then provision was made so he could **serve his master permanently. His master** would bring **him to God,** as mediated by the priests, who would validate the slaves request. Then he would be taken **to the door or the doorpost** and they would put one of his ears against the **door or doorpost** and the **master** would **pierce his ear with an awl.** An **awl** was a pointed tool used by a carpenter or leatherworker to make holes. And so the master would **pierce his ear.** This signified willing submission. His master had been gracious and kind to him and the slave therefore, willingly submitted to the master and would **serve him permanently.**¹ This text has been used to justify male ear-piercings but it has nothing to do with that. It was an external sign of an internal loyalty.

This ordinance is interesting because it truly respects the rights of the slave. His volition is never violated. He chose to sell himself into slavery. He chose to serve permanently. No matter what the situation the slaves rights are protected.

PRINCIPLE: When the slave sold himself into slavery it pictured salvation. When the slave chose to serve his master permanently it pictured discipleship. All believers are slaves but not all believers are willing slaves. To be a willing slave the believer must consciously choose to be a willingly servant of God for the rest of His life (Heb = *ebed*; Gk = *doulos*). All believers have submitted to the gospel of Jesus Christ but not all believers have submitted to the Lordship of Jesus Christ. Once this slave sold himself

into slavery he had to serve until he paid off his debt or for six years, whichever came first. However, when this slave chose to serve permanently this was a new attitude. All believers have submitted to the gospel of Jesus Christ and been saved but not all believers have this new attitude toward the Lordship of Jesus Christ and become His disciple. The slave illustrates the difference between a believer in Jesus Christ and a disciple of Jesus Christ. Both are acts of the volition but only discipleship requires commitment. Salvation is a free gift based on faith alone in Christ alone. Discipleship is costly and based on willing obedience to Christ alone. Discipleship is not required for being freed from the penalty of sin which is eternal condemnation (Phase 1). However, discipleship is required for being freed from the power of sin over the believer's life (Phase 2).

Romans 6:11-13 Even so consider yourselves (you justified one's who are positionally in Christ, make this consideration, that you are...) to be dead to sin, but alive to God in Christ Jesus (you are to live the resurrection life). ¹² Therefore do not let sin reign (have dominion/power) in your mortal body so that you obey its lusts, ¹³ and do not go on presenting the members of your body to sin *as* instruments of unrighteousness; but present yourselves to God (a conscious dedication of your whole person to God to be used for His purposes) as those alive from the dead (spiritually alive), and your members (body) *as* instruments of righteousness to God (the members of your body can be used for God or against God, see also Rom 12:1-2).

This is what the Bible means when it speaks of discipleship. It is the conscious decision of a believer, one already in Christ, when he gives his whole person to God to be used at His disposal and to become a learner who applies the truth. He is devoted to God's truth and follows it wherever it leads no matter the consequences. He seeks the approval of God and not men. Therefore, the call to discipleship is not the call of salvation but comes after salvation. To see this turn to John 8:31.

John 8:30-32 As He spoke these things, many came to believe in Him [episteusan eis auton]. ³¹ So Jesus was saying to those Jews who had believed Him, "If you continue [abide - *meno*] in My word, *then* you are truly disciples of Mine; ³² and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free."

Does one have to "remain in the word" to be a genuine believer. No, one need only have faith in Christ alone. Clearly some of these Jews believed in Him (v 30). Then Jesus gives the call to discipleship after they became believers and said "If you abide in My word, you are truly disciples of mine. If He means "We will see if you are really believers by

whether you remain in My word” then salvation is not by faith alone but by faith + remaining in His word. But what if you remain in His word for 50 years and then don’t remain in His word for the last year of your life and then you die. Were you really a believer? Obviously this call to discipleship has nothing to do with checking to make sure they really are believers. Rather, Christ is giving them the condition for being a true disciple. If you abide in My word. Maybe you will, maybe you won’t, but if you do you are truly His disciple. Further, “you will know the truth and the truth will make you free.” Free from what? Free from the reigning power of sin in the believer’s life. Ok, so, the picture of the slave in Exodus 20:1-6 choosing to willingly submit to his master permanently is a picture of the believer becoming a disciple. Not all believers are willing to submit to God. Not all believers have consciously reckoned themselves dead to sin and alive to God (Rom 6:11). Not all believers are truly disciples. In the OT, Moses was “the slave of God” (Rev 15:3). In the NT, Paul called himself a “slave” of God (Rom 1:1; Gal 1:10; Tit 1:1). James called himself a “slave” of God and the Lord Jesus Christ (Js 1:1). Jude called himself a “slave” of Jesus Christ (Jude 1:1). The NT commands us not to be slaves of sin but slaves of righteousness (Rom 6:16-23). A command may be obeyed or disobeyed. Are you like the slave in this ordinance who, because of his love for his earthly master, gave up on desiring to be free from him and chose to serve him faithfully for the rest of his life? Are you ready to stop fighting against your heavenly Master and willingly submit to Him and become His faithful slave? It requires daily learning from Him in His word and daily saying no to self and daily living for Him and daily being willing to be rejected and despised by men. It’s the logical thing to do when you consider all He has done for and given you.

IV. The Ordinances Regarding Handmaids (21:7-11)

⁷ "If a man sells his daughter as a female slave [hand-maid], she is not to go free as the male slaves do.

⁸ "If she is displeasing in the eyes of her master who designated her for himself, then he shall let her be redeemed. He does not have authority to sell her to a foreign people because of his unfairness to her.

⁹ "If he designates her for his son, he shall deal with her according to the custom of daughters.

¹⁰ "If he takes to himself another woman, he may not reduce her food, her clothing, or her conjugal rights.

¹¹ "If he will not do these three *things* for her, then she shall go out for nothing, without *payment of money*.

Before you get confused, the English text reads **female slave** but the Hebrew text reads **female hand-maid**. The “Hebrew slave” in verse 2 is an *ebed* but the “female hand-maid” in verse 7 is an *amah*. There is a clear difference in the Hebrew text, although a prospective wife would ‘serve’ her master. Nevertheless, this passage is discussing the ordinance regarding a father selling his daughter as a prospective wife. Again, the basic case concerning female handmaids is found in verse 7 and four secondary cases dealing with other details that may be involved are cited in verses 8-11.

- A **If a man sells his daughter as a female hand-maid, she is not to go free as the male slaves**
- A’ **If she is displeasing in the eyes of her master who designated her for himself then he shall let her be redeemed**
- A’’ **If he designates her for his son, he shall deal with her according to the custom of daughters**
- A’’’ **If he takes to himself another woman, he may not reduce her food, her clothing, or her conjugal rights**
- A’’’’ **If he will not do these three *things* for her, then she shall go out for nothing**

Verse 7, as I said before, this does not refer to a father selling his daughter into slavery but a father selling his daughter into a situation leading to betrothal. She would still be a minor when the transaction occurred. It was not that Hebrew father’s were cruel. This was a common Hebrew practice. It was considered advantageous for the daughter to be sold to a well-to-do neighbor rather than becoming the wife of a man in her own social class. It was understood that the **daughter** would become the wife of her master or one of his sons. Thus, her status would be that of a married woman of a higher social class. This is why, after six years of service **she was not to go free as the male slaves** (vv 2-6). She was either married or designated to marry a son. She would therefore have full marriage rights to live in her husband’s house all her life.

Verse 8, **if she is displeasing in the eyes of her master who designated her for himself**. In other words, if the **master designated her** to be his wife and then **she** was found to be **displeasing** (*raah* – evil) before the marriage took place, **then he shall let her be redeemed**. She could not be redeemed by foreigners but only by her nearest kinsman; a family member or she herself could pay the redemption price. Then she would be free from **her master**. If this took place neither the father nor the master nor the daughter was mistreated. All maintained their integrity.

Verse 9, **if he designates her for his son**, that is, to be the wife of **his son**, then **he shall deal with her** as a daughter. She would gain family status and must be treated as family.

Verse 10, **If he**, that is, the master, **takes to himself another woman**, another wife in addition to her, then **he may not reduce her food, her clothing, or her conjugal rights**. In other words, she **may not** be treated any differently than she was before her husband took a second wife, at least with respect to **food, clothing and conjugal rights**. The Hebrew word translated **conjugal rights** (*onah*), however, has nothing to do with sexual intercourse. This translation was a later tradition (e.g. the meaning of gay in 1800's vs gay in 2000). The meaning in Moses day was **living quarters**. In other words, he could not stick her in a corner but he must provide her with the same quality of living quarters and provision as he did before the second wife. If he reduced any of these then a provision was made for her in verse 11.

Verse 11, **If he will not do these three things for her, then she shall go out for nothing**. No redemption price is necessary since her husband broke his obligations. He therefore loses his rights as her husband and she is free.

The ordinances regarding Hebrew slaves protected the volition of the slave so that he sold himself of his own volition into slavery and after six years he would be set free from all debt and would go out as he came in. However, if he loved his master, his wife and children then he could, of his own volition choose to serve permanently in the house of the master. To seal this arrangement they would go before God and the judges would witness this decision and the master would pierce his ear with an awl to signify the servants willing submission to the master (21:1-6). This parallels the believer becoming a disciple. Salvation and discipleship are not the same. All who have faith in Christ are believers but not all who have faith in Christ are disciples. Salvation is a free gift conditioned on faith alone. Discipleship is a commitment conditioned on abiding in His word and being obedient to His word.

The ordinances regarding a daughter sold as a handmaid had in view a prospective betrothal and marriage. If she was displeasing the master she could be redeemed before the marriage took place by a kinsman. If she married his son she would gain full family status. If the master took her as wife but then took another wife he was required to provide the same amount of food, clothing and living quarters. If he refused to do this he lost his rights as husband and she was set free for nothing (21:7-11).

ⁱ How this squares with the Year of Jubilee (50th year) when all were to be released is not clear. It is possible that since the slave chose to serve permanently he would not be released even in the year of Jubilee.

[Back To The Top](#)

Click [Here](#) to return to other lessons.

[Return to Fredericksburg Bible Church Web Site](#)