



Studies in the Book of Exodus

Text
Exodus 21:1-27

Topic
God limited the length of time an Israelite
could serve as a slave to 6 years

Title
“One-half of 12 Years a Slave”

If you have a job that seems menial, or sounds boring to people, perhaps you should consider giving it a more creative title.

You’ve all heard the title, Domestic Engineer, applied to a housewife (or a house husband).

Likewise, you’re not a Garbage Man; you’re a Sanitation Engineer.

See if you can spot the jobs behind these titles:

- Director of First Impressions - That’s a Receptionist.
- Vision Clearance Engineer - That’s a Window Washer.
- Media Distribution Agent - That’s a Newspaper boy or girl.

- Reprographics Expert - That's someone who makes copies.

There's a word in the Bible with so much negative connotation that the translators try to avoid using it as much as possible. They use acceptable variants that to our ears make it sound less severe.

According to one commentator, the Hebrew word we're talking about appears 800 times as a noun, and nearly 300 times as a verb. It is the word for "slave."

It appears eleven hundred times in the Old Testament; but if you do a search for it in the New King James Version, you'll find that it's translated "slave" only about fifteen times.

Instead of "slave" the translators opt for "servant" or "bondservant."

It's done for good reason. They want to differentiate biblical slavery from what we normally associate with slavery. We can't help but think of the abominable American institution of slavery - the bondage and oppression experienced by Africans in the 18th and 19th centuries on our soil.

Slavery in the Bible was nothing like what we are familiar with. Nothing.

We have a tough task ahead of us in chapter twenty-one of Exodus. We have to think of slavery in the biblical sense.

- It wasn't a horrifying institution by which men owned other men and women as property.
- But it wasn't exactly Club Med, either.

Then, just as we finish discussing slavery, Moses brings up capital punishment.

One way to keep ourselves focused on what the Bible teaches versus the biases we bring is to draw out the fact that underlying *everything* in these verses is **the sanctity of all human life**.

Slaves and free men alike were understood to be made in the image of God. All life was to be respected. Disrespect for it brought the severest of punishment.

I'll organize my comments on these verses around two points: #1 You See The Sanctity Of Human Life In The Maintaining Of Slaves, and #2 You See The Sanctity Of Human Life In The Mandating Of Capital Punishment.

#1 You See The Sanctity Of Human Life In The Maintaining Of Slaves

(v1-11)

According to the *American Psychiatric Association*, by age 18, a US youth will have seen 16,000 simulated murders and 200,000 acts of violence.

Those numbers double if they watch one episode of *The Walking Dead*. (Just kidding about that last one).

I don't want to be drawn into the debate about whether or not media violence is to blame for what is happening among our youth. Without saying where it leads a viewer, a case can be made for the devaluing of human life in our media.

Then there is the absolute horror of abortion on demand. Between 1970 and 2014, the CDC reports nearly 44.5 million legal induced abortions in the US.

As of March 2018, human euthanasia is legal in the Netherlands, Belgium, Colombia, Luxembourg, Canada and India. Assisted suicide is legal in Switzerland, Germany, South Korea, Japan, and in the US states of Washington, Oregon, Colorado, Hawaii, Vermont, Montana, Washington DC and California. An assisted dying scheme in the Australian state of Victoria will come into effect in mid-2019.

Sanctity of life seems to be at an all-time low.

What exactly do we mean by the sanctity of life? It can have more than one definition, but this is a good one:

The phrase “sanctity of life” reflects the belief that, because people are made in God’s image (Genesis 1:26-27), human life has an inherently sacred attribute that should be protected and respected at all times.

God gives directions on how the Hebrews were to maintain slaves. Those directions are built upon the bedrock of the sanctity of all human life. We might summarize them by saying, “You can’t treat a slave as a slave.” God demand slaves be treated as full, 100% human beings, with respect.

Israel had no prisons; no penal system. Instead they had a type of slavery that promoted *restoration* and *restitution*.

Exo 21:1 "Now these *are* the judgments which you shall set before them:

God had previously spoken aloud to Israel the Ten Commandments. The “judgments” given in the next few chapters are guidelines given to judges in order that they might apply the Ten Commandments to particular cases that will arise among Israelites.

These first verses, one through eleven, are the Ten Commandments applied to slaves.

Before we look at them, let’s talk about how you could become a slave. According to one source, there were four basic ways a Hebrew might become a slave to another Hebrew:

- In extreme poverty, they might sell their liberty (Leviticus 25:39).
- A distressed father might sell his children into servitude (Exodus 21:7).
- In the case of bankruptcy, a man might become servant to his creditors (Second Kings 4:1).
- If a thief had nothing with which to pay proper restitution, he served as a slave (Exodus 22:3-4).

The instructions that follow are “judgments” that apply the Ten Commandments to slavery. There certainly were other cases not listed in the Bible that required the judges to apply precedent.

This isn’t *comprehensive* of all cases, but it is *typical* of all cases.

Exo 21:2 If you buy a Hebrew servant, he shall serve six years; and in the seventh he shall go out free and pay nothing.

Whoa! Right away you understand that Hebrew slavery was entirely different than anything we might be familiar with.

The maximum tenure of a slave was six years. Then, freedom; and more than freedom. According to Deuteronomy 15:13-14,

Deu 15:13 And when you send him away free from you, you shall not let him go away empty-handed;

Deu 15:14 you shall supply him liberally from your flock, from your threshing floor, and from your winepress. *From what* the LORD has blessed you with, you shall give to him.

Commentators can't agree on whether "in the seventh" means in the Sabbatical year; or at the end of any six-year period.

In biblical times, the Hebrews were supposed to let their land rest every seventh year - as a Sabbath. It was for failing to do this for 490 years that the Jews were required to remain captive in Babylon for 70 years during the time of Daniel.

I'm thinking slavery lasted a maximum of six years regardless of the Sabbatical year. After six consecutive years a slave was emancipated without having to be bought, or to buy himself or herself, out of slavery. He was gifted to help re-establish him.

Exo 21:3 If he comes in by himself, he shall go out by himself; if he *comes in* married, then his wife shall go out with him.

This tells us that even though a slave, the man was able to maintain a home life with his wife and children. There was respect for marriage, and for family.

Exo 21:4 If his master has given him a wife, and she has borne him sons or daughters, the wife and her children shall be her master's, and he shall go out by himself.

You're serving your six years and a woman in the household catches your eye. You fall in love, get married, and have kids.

At the end of your six years, your wife and kids belong to the master of the house. Unfair, you say? *Then don't get married while you're a slave.* It wasn't a trick; everyone knew the rules.

It's getting typical that believers follow their feelings over their faith:

- "I fell in love with an unbeliever; it must be from God."
- "I fell in love with someone but I'm married; it must be from God."

How could it be so wrong when it 'feels' so right?

Write this down: ***It isn't blessed of God if you sin by doing it.***

Exo 21:5 But if the servant plainly says, 'I love my master, my wife, and my children; I will not go out free,'

Freedom of choice. That's not typical of slavery as we know it.

There wasn't pressure from the master of the house - no coercion or threatening. No, the slave preferred to stay and serve in this household. It was based on "love."

Exo 21:6 then his master shall bring him to the judges. He shall also bring him to the door, or to the doorpost, and his master shall pierce his ear with an awl; and he shall serve him forever.

The slave must declare in a public, legal ceremony, that he was making this decision himself. He took this obligation freely, without any mental reservation or purpose of evasion.

He was then 'earmarked' as a lifelong slave.

I note in passing that piercings are biblical. And probably they wore an earring. If you've had your ear pierced, you know that if you don't wear jewelry it will close-up.

What good is having your ear pierced to identify you as a permanent slave if the piercing closes-up?

Exo 21:7 "And if a man sells his daughter to be a female slave, she shall not go out as the male slaves do.

It's hard to pin everything down exactly, but it seems that a daughter might be sold to be a housekeeper or do other work.

There was nothing perverse about this. This wasn't sex trafficking.

That doesn't mean it was easy. But remember the father had fallen on hard times and needed help.

- We have a foster care system, do we not? It isn't the ideal, but it can be very helpful.
- We encourage adoptions, do we not? It isn't the ideal, but it can preserve the sanctity of life.

Exo 21:8 If she does not please her master, who has betrothed her to himself, then he shall let her be redeemed. He shall have no right to sell her to a foreign people, since he has dealt deceitfully with her.

I wish all this was more clear; it isn't. What we can say is that a "betrothal" took place. The master of the house intended to marry her. Then he decided not to. In that case, "he has dealt deceitfully with her." **She had rights** - and he had wronged her. She could not be sold as property, but must be cared for.

In case you're not aware, Disneyland is changing an iconic scene in its *Pirates of the Caribbean* ride. The scene that once had a redheaded character named Redd as part of a "wench sale" with signs that read "Auction - Take a wench for a bride" has changed with the times. Redd will now be a pirate who's just pillaged the town's rum supply and has something to say about it.

I love the ride but all of it is problematic for children:

*Yo ho, yo ho, a pirate's life for me
We pillage, we plunder, we rifle, and loot
Drink up, me 'earties, yo ho
We kidnap and ravage and don't give a hoot
Drink up me 'earties, yo ho*

The song goes on to glorify filching and sacking; embezzling and hijacking... Charring, inflaming, igniting; burning cities and frightening. All in good fun?

Exo 21:9 And if he has betrothed her to his son, he shall deal with her according to the custom of daughters.

Exo 21:10 If he takes another *wife*, he shall not diminish her food, her clothing, and her marriage rights.

Exo 21:11 And if he does not do these three for her, then she shall go out free, without *paying* money.

In the case of a female slave, she could not go out free in the seventh year if her master had taken her as a wife or concubine and was willing to fulfill his responsibilities to her. If he was not willing, she had to be redeemed, but could not be sold to Gentiles.

If he wanted her as a wife for his son, then he had to treat her as he would any daughter-in-law.

If the master took another wife, he was still responsible to provide for the slave girl and to give her full marriage rights.

Multiple wives and concubines rightfully bother us. Tribal societies create certain unusual circumstances that push the envelope. For example, in Israel, the family name must continue. No tribe could go extinct. It made for unusual provisions - like the one that said a brother must produce children for a deceased brother by having sex with his sister-in-law.

Should we follow these judgments and restore biblical slavery?
No.

These judgments were the application of the Ten Commandments in the foundational, tribal society of Israel.

We should make application of the Ten Commandments to our western, non-tribal society.

The true wonder of these verses is the preservation of the sanctity of life. We can look at our laws and ask ourselves, “Are we maintaining the sanctity of all human life?”

#2 You See The Sanctity Of Human Life In The Mandating Of Capital Punishment

(v12-27)

Nineteenth century novelist Alphonse Karr said, “If we want to abolish the death penalty, **let our friends the murderers take the first step.**”

Another Alphonse, twentieth century gangster Alphonse Capone, said, “You can get much farther with a kind word and a gun than you can with a kind word alone.”

The Old Testament Law prescribed capital punishment for an extensive list of crimes, including:

- Murder (Exodus 21:12-14; Leviticus 24:17,21).
- Attacking or cursing a parent (Exodus 21:15,17).
- Disobedience to parents (Deuteronomy 21:18-21).
- Kidnapping (Exodus 21:16).
- Failure to confine a dangerous animal, resulting in death (Exodus 21:28-29).
- Witchcraft and sorcery (Exodus 22:18, Leviticus 20:27, Deuteronomy 13:5, 1 Samuel 28:9).
- Human sacrifice (Leviticus 20:2-5).
- Sex with an animal (Exodus 22:19, Leviticus 20:16).
- Doing work on the Sabbath (Exodus 31:14, 35:2, Numbers 15:32-36).
- Incest (Leviticus 18:6-18, 20:11-12,14,17,19-21).
- Adultery (Leviticus 20:10; Deuteronomy 22:22).

- Homosexual acts (Leviticus 20:13).
- Prostitution by a priest's daughter (Leviticus 21:9).
- Blasphemy (Leviticus 24:14,16, 23).
- False prophecy (Deuteronomy 18:20).
- Perjury in capital cases (Deuteronomy 19:16-19).
- Refusing to obey a decision of a judge or priest (Deuteronomy 17:12).
- False claim of a woman's virginity at time of marriage (Deuteronomy 22:13-21).
- Sex between a woman pledged to be married and a man other than her betrothed (Deuteronomy 22:23-24).

We see four specific cases in the following verses: Premeditated murder; physical violence against parents; kidnapping; and the verbal abuse of parents.

Exo 21:12 "He who strikes a man so that he dies shall surely be put to death.

Since we've just seen regarding the treatment of slaves that God promotes the sanctity of all human life, we must conclude that His prescribing capital punishment also upholds sanctity.

I like what the good folks at *Answers in Genesis* have to say. They quote God's instruction to Noah after the flood, in Genesis 9:6, which says, "Whoever sheds man's blood, By man his blood shall be shed; For in the image of God He made man."

Then they apply it this way:

Though Genesis 9:6 may seem inconsistent or contradictory to the sanctity of life, **it in fact demonstrates the sacredness of human life.** The Scriptures view murder as such a contemptible

crime against man and God that the only just penalty is the forfeiting of the murderer's life. Any other punishment degrades the life of the victim. Any other punishment risks additional murderous acts, even by those serving a lifetime prison sentence. Any other punishment reduces the heinousness of murder, thereby endangering society by lessening its stigma. In a sinful society, Genesis 9:6, though a dreadful command, is a blessing from God. It furnishes the ultimate protection for human life.

Whenever the subject of capital punishment comes up, we like to try to win the point by arguing that it is a deterrent to crime, or something like that.

The real issue is this: Has God prescribed it as a punishment? If He has, then that settles it.

- It's pretty clear God prescribed it for Noah's descendants.
- It's pretty clear He demanded it in Israel.
- I don't see it rescinded in the New Testament. In fact, in a famously quoted verse from Romans 13, we are told that, "if you do wrong, be afraid, for rulers do not bear the sword for no reason. They are God's servants, agents of wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer" (v4).

Exo 21:13 However, if he did not lie in wait, but God delivered *him* into his hand, then I will appoint for you a place where he may flee.

A provision was made for accidental, unintentional deaths; for manslaughter. God's altar was the safe place to flee to. Cities of refuge were later set up where the person responsible for the death could flee for safety of retribution until the judges could hear the case.

Exo 21:14 "But if a man acts with premeditation against his neighbor, to kill him by treachery, you shall take him from My altar, that he may die.

"Take him from My altar" meant that there was no place of refuge; the murderer must be executed.

Exo 21:15 "And he who strikes his father or his mother shall surely be put to death.

Note to self: Take elder abuse seriously.

Exo 21:16 "He who kidnaps a man and sells him, or if he is found in his hand, shall surely be put to death.

Kidnapping to sell... That sounds like the kind of slavery we're more familiar with. God said folks involved in that kind of slave trade deserved the death penalty.

Exo 21:17 "And he who curses his father or his mother shall surely be put to death.

As a practical matter, the judges of Israel rarely if ever administered the death penalty in such cases, yet the child was held accountable. Remember - these are guidelines for judges.

The remaining verses follow no real order; they simply speak to cases that were likely to occur. Let's read them and then comment on one important but misunderstood principle in them

Exo 21:18 "If men contend with each other, and one strikes the other with a stone or with *his* fist, and he does not die but is confined to *his* bed,

Exo 21:19 if he rises again and walks about outside with his staff, then he who struck *him* shall be acquitted. He shall only pay *for* the loss of his time, and shall provide *for him* to be thoroughly healed.

Exo 21:20 "And if a man beats his male or female servant with a rod, so that he dies under his hand, he shall surely be punished.

Exo 21:21 Notwithstanding, if he remains alive a day or two, he shall not be punished; for he *is* his property.

Exo 21:22 "If men fight, and hurt a woman with child, so that she gives birth prematurely, yet no harm follows, he shall surely be punished accordingly as the woman's husband imposes on him; and he shall pay as the judges *determine*.

Exo 21:23 But if *any* harm follows, then you shall give life for life,

Exo 21:24 eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot,

Exo 21:25 burn for burn, wound for wound, stripe for stripe.

Exo 21:26 "If a man strikes the eye of his male or female servant, and destroys it, he shall let him go free for the sake of his eye.

Exo 21:27 And if he knocks out the tooth of his male or female servant, he shall let him go free for the sake of his tooth.

Zero-in on "Life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, burn for burn, wound for wound, stripe for stripe."

What about that? Well, first of all - *it wasn't meant literally*. How do we know that? Because in verse twenty-six a man destroys the eye of another man, but the prescribed punishment isn't to take his eye. Likewise in verse twenty-seven regarding knocking out a tooth.

The law of "an eye for an eye" is mentioned twice more in the Old Testament. Each time, the phrase is used in the context of a case being judged before a civil authority such as a judge.

“An eye for an eye” was intended to be a guiding principle for lawgivers and judges; it was never to be used to justify vigilantism or settling grievances personally.

It meant that the punishment must fit the crime. You should not be overly severe; you should not be overly lenient.

Capital punishment upholds the sanctity of all human life. One of the commentators wrote, “This grand principle of the sanctity of human life, if acted on all round, would discourage **all** violence and inaugurate the era of universal peace and good will towards man.”

It wouldn't be right to end this study without returning to the slave 'earmarked' by choice for lifelong service to his master.

Throughout the New Testament, the earmarked slave is applied metaphorically to someone absolutely devoted to Jesus. Paul, Timothy, James, Peter, and Jude all describe themselves as “bondservants of Christ,” where by “bondservant” they mean *voluntary, lifelong slavery*.

The writer of the Book of Hebrews applies Psalm 40 to Jesus. In that psalm, the Lord says to His Father, “My ears you have opened.” Some commentators think it is a reference to being 'earmarked' as a lifelong slave.

You might be a Domestic Engineer... Or a Sanitation Engineer...
But are you first and foremost a bondservant - earmarked for Jesus?

*My Master, lead me to the door;
Pierce this now-willing ear once more.*

*Thy bonds are freedom; let me stay
With Thee to toil, endure, obey.*