

**Exegetical Notes, Exodus 21:1-11**  
**“Hebrew Slaves?”**

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**Exodus 21:1-11**

*(Beginning with Exodus 21 we enter a difficult section of the book of Exodus that deals with the working out of the 10 commandments practically, and the ceremonial expectations of the law. Often, these passages are skipped over by Christians as having little to do with our modern, New Testament life. However, 2 Timothy 3:16 says that all Scripture is inspired and profitable for our instruction. Therefore, we will study these sections of the Bible over the next several weeks to allow the Holy Spirit to lead us to the truth they contain.)*

**Verse 1**

***“These are the laws you are to set before them:***

- The Ten Commandments have been given. See Exodus 20:1-17. These commandments lay the foundation upon which human interaction with God and with each other are to be regulated and governed. However, the specific and practical application of the Ten Commandments has not been fully explained. With these words, God begins a fuller explanation of how the commandments will govern human relationships with him and with other people.

**Verse 2**

***“If you buy a Hebrew servant, he is to serve you for six years. But in the seventh year, he shall go free, without paying anything.”***

- The word translated “servant” is better translated “slave.” In the culture of the time slavery was common. The moral issue raised here is not the right to own slaves but how slaves are to be treated if they are owned.
- This passage does not deal with slaves in general but only with how Hebrews are to deal with other Hebrews who may be their slaves. Rules governing the treatment of non-Hebrew slaves are found in Leviticus 25:44-46. Therefore this is more a question of how I get along with members of my own family than it is how I get along with people who are not of my family. The concern is the treatment of

other members of the community of faith who for some reason come under my control.

- It is important to remember that God had just freed all of the Hebrews from slavery in Egypt. Therefore, at the time this rule was written there were no slaves in Israel. We know that slavery was a form of social welfare in the culture of the time. If a person went into debt and could not repay his creditors, the only option open to him was slavery. A person could sell himself, or one of his children, to settle his debt. Therefore, the kind of slavery discussed here is a way of declaring bankruptcy.
- Because freedom is precious and a gift of God to the Hebrews, no Hebrew is to enslave another Hebrew for more than six years. The contract can only last for six years. On the seventh year of the contract, the debt is cancelled and the man forced into slavery by his bankruptcy is to be set free without any obligation to the person who bought him. This seven-year limit is a great gift imposed on men by God limiting the term in which one man can own another.

### **Verse 3**

***“If he comes alone, he is to go free alone; but if he has a wife when he comes, she is to go with him.”***

- As with everything, there are complications and exceptions. What about the slave’s wife? If he was married when he sold himself to pay his debt, does his wife also go free at the end of six years? It is only the hardness of men’s hearts to other men that make it necessary to answer this question specifically. She does, of course, go free with her husband.

### **Verse 4**

***“If his master gives him a wife and she bears him sons or daughters, the woman and her children shall belong to her master, and only the man shall go free.”***

- How complicated human interactions become! What happens if the master has provided a wife for the slave during the time of his service? Under such circumstances, does the wife accompany the freed slave at his emancipation or remain with the master?
- Because the assumption is that this wife was forced upon him by the master and was not of his choice, the woman and any children that she may have borne remain the property of the master. The assumption is that she will be better cared for by her master than she would be by a husband that did not really want her in the first place.

### **Verse 5-6**

***“But if the servant declares, ‘I love my master and my wife and children and do not want to go free,’ then his master must take him before the judges. He shall take him to the door or the doorpost and pierce his ear with an awl. Then he will be his servant for life.”***

- If the man is truly in love with his wife and children and does not want to leave them, he must be willing to remain a slave in the master’s household for the rest of his life. The simple fact is that this is the responsibility given to men as the head of their household. See Ephesians 5:21-33. As head of the household, husbands are to lay down their lives for their wives and children as Christ laid down his for the Church. This is an Old Testament picture or “type” of the relationship described in the New Testament. To keep his wife and children, the slave must literally give up his life.

### **Verse 7**

***“If a man sells his daughter as a servant, she is not to go free as menservants do.”***

- Who, we ask, would sell his own daughter into slavery? In that ancient time, daughters were considered the property of their fathers and a cruel father might sell his daughter if he decided to, without any fear of recrimination. She was his to do with as he pleased. Women were, therefore, under the control of their fathers until marriage and under the control of their husbands thereafter. So, even a loving father who had encountered some severe debt might decide to sell his daughter to cancel his financial reverses and a cruel father might sell his daughter just to make a little money and be rid of the cost of her keeping.
- However, if a father was to decide to sell his own flesh in slavery to another, should such a man have his daughter returned to him at the end of six years so that he could sell her again? In the daughter’s best interest, the answer is no. Such a father has abused the relationship of trust between himself and his daughter and should not have her under his care again. She should not be returned to her father’s household.

### **Verse 8**

***“If she does not please the master who has selected her for himself, he must let her be redeemed. He has no right to sell her to foreigners, because he has broken faith with her.”***

- Again, human choices complicate life. In this case, the assumption was that the master purchased the girl from her father for his own sexual use. She was to become his wife or his mistress. However, after buying her, he found her not to be of his liking. Under such circumstances what was to become of her since she displeased him?
- The answer is that he was to allow her to be “redeemed.” It means that he was selling her again. But she could not simply be sold to anyone. She must first be offered to her father, and if he could not or would not buy her back, she was to be offered to her nearest relative. If no one else was willing to take her, she could be offered for sale among the Hebrews. But under no circumstance was she to be sold outside of Israel.
- Again, while this all seems exceptionally mean to us, in a culture where women were property and without rights under law, this rule was design to protect women from the mistreatment of men.

### **Verse 9-11**

***“If he selects her for his son, he must grant her the rights of a daughter. If he (the son) marries another woman, he must not deprive the first one of her food, clothing, and marital rights. If he does not provide her with these three things, she is to go free, without any payment of money.”***

- Sometimes a father might purchase a girl from her father with the intention of marrying her to his son. Technically, she was bought from her father as a slave. However, once married to the son, she becomes the son’s wife and the daughter of the man who purchased her. She is to be recognized as such and elevated from the place of a slave.
- Polygamy was the practice of the time. If the son married a second time, his first wife, though purchased as a slave, retained the rights of a wife and a daughter. As such she was entitled to food, clothing, and sexual relations with her husband. If he refused to give her these things, she was free to leave him without making any financial restitution to her father-in-law.

(These exegetical notes are the foundational study for the sermon entitled *Hebrew Slaves?* They have been prepared by the Reverend Doctor Charles H. Jensen, Senior Pastor at Cornerstone Fellowship, Coatesville Pennsylvania. All rights are reserved by Dr. Jensen and *Cornerstone Fellowship*.)