

Exegetical Notes, Exodus 21:12-36
“What If You Hurt Somebody?”

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Exodus 21:12-36

(Beginning with Exodus 21 we enter a difficult section of the book of Exodus which 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 12-14

“Anyone who strikes a man and kills him shall surely be put to death. However, if he does not do it intentionally, but God lets it happen, he is to flee to a place I will designate. But if a man schemes and kills another man deliberately, take him away from my altar and put him to death.”

- The Ten Commandments says, “Thou shall not murder.” See Exodus 20:13. It means to plot and execute a plan to take the life of another human being, and it is forbidden without reservation. This rule makes it clear that the basic law does not cover accidental death.
- Later Moses will designate “Cities of Refuge” to which a person who accidentally killed another may go to be safe. However, for those who deliberately kill another human, there is no place of refuge, not even the altar of God.
- A person who murders another is to be punished by death.

Verse 15

“Anyone who attacks his father or his mother must be put to death.”

- The Ten Commandments say, “Honor your father and your mother.” See Exodus 20:12. The word translated “attack” is better translated “strikes.” Literally this verse says that no one is to “hit” their father or

their mother. If they so much as hit their parent, they are to be executed.

Verse 16

“Anyone who kidnaps another and either sells him or still has him when he is caught must be put to death.”

- Kidnapping, while not mentioned in the Ten Commandments specifically, is also considered a capital crime punishable by death.

Verse 17

“Anyone who curses his father or mother must be put to death.”

See Exodus 20:12 and Exodus 21:15. Here, the meaning of the word “attack” is enlarged. Now an attack against one’s parents can simply be verbal. A verbal assault against one’s parents is also punishable by death.

Verse 18-19

“If men quarrel and one hits the other with a stone or with his fist and he does not die but is confined to bed, the one who struck the blow will not be held responsible if the other gets up and walks around outside with his staff; however, he must pay the injured man for the loss of his time and see that he is completely healed.”

- If you hurt someone in a fight, you become responsible for that person’s welfare until they are recovered no matter who threw the first blow.

Verse 20-21

“If a man beats his male or female slave with a rod and the slave dies as a direct result, he must be punished, but he is not to be punished if the slave gets up after a day or two, since the slave is his property.”

- Slavery is a given because of the hardness of men’s hearts. However, masters are to treat slaves with some regard. If they abuse their slaves they are to be punished.

Verse 22-25

“If men who are fighting hit a pregnant woman and she gives birth prematurely, but there is no serious injury, the offender must be fined whatever the woman’s husband demands and the court allows. But if there is serious injury, you are to take life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, burn for burn, wound for wound, bruise for bruise.”

- Generally, this rule is known as the “lex talionis” In Deuteronomy 19:21 it is generally applied. Here, however, it refers to a specific situation. If men are fighting and accidentally involve a pregnant woman and she goes into labor, this is the rule which is applied if the child is hurt at birth. Whatever injury the child experiences is to be inflicted on the offender.

Verse 26-27

“If a man hits his manservant or maidservant in the eye and destroys it, he must let the servant go free to compensate for the eye. And if he knocks out the tooth of a manservant or a maidservant, he must let the servant go free to compensate for the tooth.”

- This is the first working out of the “lex talionis.” If you injure your slave there is to be compensation even if they are slaves. The compensation is freedom.

Verse 28-31

“If a bull gores a man or a woman to death, the bull must be stoned to death, and its meat must not be eaten. But the owner of the bull will not be held responsible. If, however, the bull has had a habit of goring and the owner has been warned but has not kept it penned up, and it kills a man or woman, the bull must be stoned and the owner also must be put to death. However, if payment is demanded of him, he may redeem his life by paying whatever is demanded. This law also applies if the bull gores a son or daughter. If the bull gores a male or female slave, the owner must pay thirty shekels of silver to the master of the slave, and the bull must be stoned.”

- An animal, in this case a bull, which causes death to an individual must be killed. If the animal has a history of causing injury to people and his owner does nothing to prevent that behavior, the owner must die, too, or pay whatever is demanded to redeem his life.

Verse 33-34

“If a man uncovers a pit or digs one and fails to cover it and an ox or a donkey falls into it, the owner of the pit must pay for the loss; he must pay its owner, and the dead animal will be his.”

- Simply put, you must assume responsibility for your actions. So, if you dig a pit and do not cover it and some injury occurs, you are responsible.

Verse 35-36

“If a man’s bull injures the bull of another and it dies, they are to sell the live one and divide the money and the dead animal equally.

However, if it was known that the bull had the habit of goring, yet the owner did not keep it penned up, the owner must pay, animal for animal, and the dead animal will be his.

- Again the principle remains the same. You are not only responsible for your own actions as in the case of digging a pit, but you are also responsible for the actions of that which belongs to you. So, if your bull hurts the bull of someone else, you must make restitution.

(These exegetical notes are the foundational study for the sermon entitled *What If You Hurt Somebody?* 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*.)