

Exegetical Notes, Exodus 22:1-15 “It’s My Stuff”

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Exodus 22:1-15

(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 1

“If a man steals an ox or a sheep and slaughters it or sells it, he must pay back five head of cattle for the ox and four sheep for the sheep.”

- The Ten Commandments says, “Thou shall not steal.” See Exodus 20:15. It means that you shall not take property that belongs to another. The following section deals with specific violations of this law.
- The first example concerns sheep and cattle. In the culture of the time sheep and cattle were a person’s wealth. To have an abundance of such things meant that you were well off. To take a person’s livestock was to take his wealth. It would be equivalent to stealing money in our day.
- The penalty is simple. If you take a man’s cattle, you must restore it to him five times over. If you take his sheep you must restore it to him four times over. It is not enough to just give back what you took. You must give it back with a very high penalty.

Verse 2-3a

“If a thief is caught breaking in and is struck so that he dies, the defender is not guilty of bloodshed, but if it happens after sunrise, he is guilty of bloodshed.”

- If you catch someone breaking into your house at night, you are justified if you hit him and he dies. However if the same thing happens in day light and the thief dies you will be held guilty of murder.
- This may seem strange but the time of day changes the issue because other alternatives are available. In daylight other people could be called to assist you to stop the thief. The authorities would be available. The situation is not so desperate in the daylight as it is at night.
- The point is that even under such circumstances as these, people are required to act with reason.

Verse 3b-4

“A thief must certainly make restitution, but if he has nothing, he must be sold to pay for his theft. If the stolen animal is found alive in his possession -- whether ox or donkey or sheep -- he must pay back double.”

- The point raised from verse 4 to verse 15 deals with laws of restitution. The principle is that a thief is required to make restitution for his crime. If you take something that belongs to someone else, it is not enough to return what was taken. There is also a penalty that must be paid for taking it.
- This first example involving the theft of animals may seem contradictory to verse 1. However the difference is the state of the animal at the time of its recovery. In verse 1, the animal was slaughtered. In these verses, it is recovered alive.
- Here the thief is required to pay back double what he took.

Verse 5

“If a man grazes his livestock in a field or vineyard and lets them stray and they graze in another man’s field, he must make restitution from the best of his own fields or vineyard.”

- If a man’s animals destroy the fields of another, the man must restore what the animals ate from the other man’s fields by giving the other man the best that his fields produce.

Verse 6

“If a fire breaks out and spreads into thornbushes so that it burns shocks of grain or standing grain or the whole field, the one who started the fire must make restitution.”

- The point remains the same. If you start a fire which damages the property of another, you are responsible to restore what was lost in the fire.

Verse 7-9

“If a man gives his neighbor silver or goods for safekeeping and they are stolen from the neighbor’s house, the thief, if he is caught, must pay back double. But if the thief is not found, the owner of the house must appear before the judges to determine whether he has laid his hands on the other man’s property. In all cases of illegal possession of an ox, a donkey, a sheep, a garment, or any other lost property about which somebody says, ‘This is mine,’ both parties are to bring their cases before the judges. The one whom the judges declare guilty must pay back double to his neighbor.”

- If property is entrusted to another and a thief steals it, when the thief is caught he must pay back twice as much as he took.
- The problem occurs when the thief is not caught. The assumption would be that the man to whom the property was entrusted took it. Therefore the case must be decided in court. The decision of the judges is considered final.
- The same thing is true whenever there is doubt related to ownership of any property. The case must be taken to court. The decision of the judges is considered final.
- The one found guilty must pay back twice as much as he took.

Verse 10-13

“If a man gives a donkey, an ox, a sheep, or any other animal to his neighbor for safekeeping and it dies or is injured or is taken away while no one is looking, the issue between them will be settled by the taking of an oath before YHWH that the neighbor did not lay hands on the other person’s property. The owner is to accept this, and no restitution is required. But if the animal was stolen from the neighbor, he must make restitution to the owner. If it was torn to pieces by a wild animal, he shall bring in the remains as evidence and he will not be required to pay for the torn animal.”

- If a man entrusts the keeping of an animal to his neighbor and the animal is injured or lost (*The word, “taken away” means “driven away.” The animal was not stolen but for some reason wandered off on its own.*), the man to whom it was entrusted must swear an oath to

God that he did not take the animal or was not responsible for its injury. The owner of the animal is to accept the man's oath to God as truthful. No other restitution is required.

- If the animal was stolen while being watched over by the neighbor, restitution according to the rules above must be made to the owner.
- If the animal is killed by wild beasts, and he provides evidence of that fact, he is not required to do more.

Verse 14-15

“If a man borrows an animal from his neighbor and it is injured or dies while the owner is not present, he must make restitution. But if the owner is with the animal, the borrower will not have to pay. If the animal was hired, the money paid for the hire covers the loss.”

- If you borrow an animal and it dies or is injured in your care, you are responsible and must pay the owner back twice as much as the animal is worth.
- However, if the owner was present when the animal died or was injured, you are not responsible because the owner was present.
- If the animal was hired, there is no responsibility beyond the cost of the hire.

(These exegetical notes are the foundational study for the sermon entitled *It's My Stuff*. 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*.)