

# Concern for Bondservants

Exodus 21:1-11

This section of Exodus is called the Book of the Covenant (Ex. 24:7), and it consists of laws that govern Israel in line with God's holy character. Right at the beginning is this passage regulating servitude in Israel. Christians are often embarrassed by these verses, and atheists use them to attack the Bible. Both groups misunderstand what Scripture teaches. Slavery is an ever-present reality in the world, now more than ever. God brought Israel out of slavery in Egypt and He wanted them to stay out of it.

## Laws About Male Servants

The Ten Commandments are prefaced: "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage" (v20). Rather than ignore or mention the poorest and least powerful people at the end of the law, right after His instructions regarding worship, the Lord addresses how servants must be treated (20:22-26). First, a servant must be purchased and serve no longer than six years, leaving debt free in the seventh year (v2). If someone fell into debt or committed a crime for which he could not pay restitution, he could sell himself into servitude to the creditor or to someone who would pay the creditor, but the obligation had to be fulfilled in six years—no building pyramids for life. Of course, Israel had no pyramids or compulsory drafts. Rather than rotting in jail or declaring bankruptcy and ripping off those who are owed, servitude was a means of payment. Like anything it could be corrupted, hence the need to limit the duration. To kidnap and sell someone was a capital crime in Israel (21:16). Second, if a man came in alone he would go out alone, and if married, then married. If he got married while in his master's house, he would either go out alone and earn money to redeem his wife and children, or he could choose to stay (v4). This prevented two servants from getting married in order to get out of paying one person's debt. At this point, someone is going to ask, "Why doesn't God just make the master let the husband and wife go? Why have to deal with these complications at all?" The unintended consequences would be that master's would not allow their servants to get married at all. God governs this system to help the poor and indebted rise, but if you penalize those who help them, ultimately you hurt those you were trying to protect. *All taxes are ultimately paid by consumers.* Prohibiting all lending or mandating debt forgiveness is the ultimate way to hurt the downtrodden. Less people will take the risk to help and invest in those who need it the most when they are punished for doing so. The Mosaic system was built for upward mobility: "And when you send him away free from you, you shall not let him go away empty-handed; you shall supply him liberally from your flock, from your threshing floor, and from your winepress. From what the Lord your God has blessed you with, you shall give to him" (Deut. 15:13-14). Masters provided training and investment, which benefitted them and simultaneously equipped servants to be independent and productive upon leaving. The justice system and property laws are directly related to the prosperity of a nation. Those who want to erase college or Third World debt are creating a situation in which no one will want to lend to them. Hernando de Soto estimates that the value of real estate possessed but not legally owned by the poor in third world countries is \$9.3 trillion. This is capital, but dead capital, meaning that they can't get legal title at all or not without navigating a labyrinth of steps over years, which prevents leverage and investment. Third, if a servant did not want to leave

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his master's house and wanted to stay with his family, his master had to take him before the judges where he would testify to his love for his master. He would then pierce his ear as a sign of enduring service (vv5-6). This is clearly a measure of protection against wicked masters who may coerce and oppress their servants. Any runaway slaves who were abused must not be returned to their masters (Deut. 23:15-16). No system of checks is ever sin-proof, but God's love and practical care is plain. "You shall remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the Lord your God redeemed you; therefore I command you this thing today" (Deut. 15:15).

## Laws About Female Servants

If a father sold his daughter, presumably because he couldn't take care of her or wanted a better life for her (cf. Ps. 144:12), she could not be sold by her master the way a man could (v7). Rather than showing how women were treated merely as the property of men, this passage demonstrates the opposite. Women were treated with more protection than men. If her master said he planned to marry her but then changed his mind, he couldn't sell her to the high foreign bidder but had to let her be redeemed by her own (v8). Women and particularly young girls were vulnerable and therefore had to be protected. The I5 corridor is a conduit of sex trafficking, and just last week one of the current presidential candidates declared her desire to legalize prostitution—to let women be sold legally for sexual purposes. In the Bible, God requires a man to give a woman all of his financial, sexual, and emotional fidelity for the rest of his life, and to promise to be faithful to her before a public gathering of all the people they both care about before she will go to bed with him. In our culture it has become increasingly common for men and women to live together without getting married, a situation where the woman usually works and runs the house but has none of the rights and privileges of a wife. She is treated even lower than a biblical concubine. If a female servant is betrothed to the master's son, she becomes a daughter, and daughters were invested with dowries (v9). A wealthy man, in other words, could not build a harem for himself or his son. If he were to marry a servant, he could not diminish her food, clothing, or sexual rights, and if he did, she may divorce him and owe him nothing (vv10-11). She has the grounds of abandonment.

## The End of Slavery

Roman slavery was brutal because masters had unlimited authority. The apostle Paul tells Christian slaves to be faithful to their masters and become free if possible. He commands Christian masters to be just and remember their master in heaven (Eph. 6:5-9; 1 Cor. 7:23). Like polygamy, slavery is done away with by the leaven of the gospel. Paul uses his power to free Onesimus (Philemon 17-20). The gospel is offensive to the proud. There are things the proud won't touch—the grimy, the poor, the stinky, the uneducated, the slaves. We must have a different mindset: "Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus, who, being in the form of God, did not consider it robbery to be equal with God, but made Himself of no reputation, taking the form of a bondservant, and coming in the likeness of men" (Phil. 2:5-7). Jesus became a servant so that we would be free from sin and death.

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