

# EXODUS

## Chapter 21

### *Laws About Slaves*

**“Now these are the rules that you shall set before them. 2 When you buy a Hebrew slave, he shall serve six years, and in the seventh he shall go out free, for nothing. 3 If he comes in single, he shall go out single; if he comes in married, then his wife shall go out with him. 4 If his master gives him a wife and she bears him sons or daughters, the wife and her children shall be her master's, and he shall go out alone. 5 But if the slave plainly says, ‘I love my master, my wife, and my children; I will not go out free,’ 6 then his master shall bring him to God, and he shall bring him to the door or the doorpost. And his master shall bore his ear through with an awl, and he shall be his slave forever. 7 “When a man sells his daughter as a slave, she shall not go out as the male slaves do. 8 If she does not please her master, who has designated her for himself, then he shall let her be redeemed. He shall have no right to sell her to a foreign people, since he has broken faith with her. 9 If he designates her for his son, he shall deal with her as with a daughter. 10 If he takes another wife to himself, he shall not diminish her food, her clothing, or her marital rights. 11 And if he does not do these three things for her, she shall go out for nothing, without payment of money. 12 “Whoever strikes a man so that he dies shall be put to death. 13 But if he did not lie in wait for him, but God let him fall into his hand, then I will appoint for you a place to which he may flee. 14 But if a man willfully attacks another to kill him by cunning, you shall take him from my altar, that he may die. 15 “Whoever strikes his father or his mother shall be put to death. 16 “Whoever steals a man and sells him, and anyone found in possession of him, shall be put to death. 17 “Whoever curses his father or his mother shall be put to death. 18 “When men quarrel and one strikes the other with a stone or with his fist and the man does not die but takes to his bed, 19 then if the man rises again and walks outdoors with his staff, he who struck him shall be clear; only he shall pay for the loss of his time, and shall have him thoroughly healed. 20 “When a man strikes his slave, male or female, with a rod and the slave dies under his hand, he shall be avenged. 21 But if the slave survives a day or two, he is not to be avenged, for the slave is his money. 22 “When men strive together and hit a pregnant woman, so that her children come out, but there is no harm, the one who hit her shall surely be fined, as the woman's husband shall impose on him, and he shall pay as the judges determine. 23 But if there is harm, then you shall pay life for life, 24 eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, 25 burn for burn, wound for wound, stripe for stripe. 26 “When a man strikes the eye of his slave, male or female, and destroys it, he shall let the slave go free because of his eye. 27 If he knocks out the tooth of his slave, male or female, he shall let the slave go free because of his tooth. 28 “When an ox gores a man or a woman to death, the ox shall be stoned, and its flesh shall not be eaten, but the owner of the ox shall not be liable. 29 But if the ox has been accustomed to gore in the past, and its owner has been warned but has not kept it in, and it kills a man or a woman, the ox shall be stoned, and its owner also shall be put to death. 30 If a ransom is imposed on him, then he shall give for the redemption of his life whatever is imposed on him. 31 If it gores a man's son or daughter, he shall be dealt with according to this same rule. 32 If the ox gores a slave, male or female, the owner shall give to their master thirty shekels of silver, and the ox shall be stoned.**

**21:1–23:9** Egyptian civil law differs from Israelite civil law, which bears greater resemblance to the laws and practices of Mesopotamia, from which Abraham's family came (cf esp the Code of Hammurabi, c 1728–1686 BC). (TLSB)

**21:2** *Hebrew*. See note on Ge 14:13. (CSB)

Economies based on slavery were common throughout the world and still exist today in various forms. God regulated the practice in Israel, establishing certain rights for slaves and setting time limits on their bondage. (TLSB)

*in the seventh year, he shall go free.* The Lord's servants are not to be anyone's perpetual slaves. (CSB)

After six years of service, the owner was required to set the slave free without charge. The slave was in some respects like a contract employee with protection and rights under law but "owned." (TLSB)

**21:3–4** The rights of both the owner and the slave were protected. These verses reflect the common legal and social context of the second millennium BC. (TLSB)

**21:5–6** Options for the slave included perpetual bondage to his master (a "permanent contract"), by which his family would also remain intact. Slave owners also had an obligation to slaves, providing housing, food, and humane treatment. (TLSB)

**21:6** *bring him to God.* By a public oath before the leading men of the community. (TLSB)

*pierce his ear with an awl.* See Dt 15:17. Submission to this rite symbolized willing service. (CSB)

Pierced ears marked a slave in Israel. (TLSB)

**21:7** *sells his daughter.* People sold their children into service during times of famine, when they could not afford to feed them. (TLSB)

**21:8** *designated her for himself.* Betrothal; similar to our engagement but legally binding. *redeemed.* Her family could buy her back. (TLSB)

*broken faith.* The woman had certain rights under the Law and, if it was broken, she was free. The owner/husband was required to keep his social and legal commitments to her. It was esp important that she remain among her people. (TLSB)

**21:10** *another wife.* Polygamy was not necessarily approved by these provisions, but God protected the rights of women in polygamous marriages. A husband had to provide for her physical welfare and fulfill his responsibility to her. (TLSB)

*marital rights.* Providing her with sexual relations and children. (TLSB)

### *Personal Injuries*

<sup>12</sup> **"Anyone who strikes a man and kills him shall surely be put to death. <sup>13</sup> However, if he does not do it intentionally, but God lets it happen, he is to flee to a place I will designate. <sup>14</sup> But if a man schemes and kills another man deliberately, take him away from my altar and put him to death. <sup>15</sup> "Anyone who attacks his father or his mother must be put to death. <sup>16</sup> "Anyone who kidnaps another and either sells him or still has him when he is caught must be put to death. <sup>17</sup> "Anyone who curses his father or mother must be put to death. <sup>18</sup> "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, <sup>19</sup> 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. <sup>20</sup> "If a man beats his male or female slave with a rod and the slave dies as a direct result, he must be punished, <sup>21</sup> but he is not to be punished if the slave gets up after a day or two, since the slave is his property. <sup>22</sup>**

**“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. <sup>23</sup> But if there is serious injury, you are to take life for life, <sup>24</sup> eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, <sup>25</sup> burn for burn, wound for wound, bruise for bruise. <sup>26</sup> “If a man hits a manservant or maidservant in the eye and destroys it, he must let the servant go free to compensate for the eye. <sup>27</sup> And if he knocks out the tooth of a manservant or maidservant, he must let the servant go free to compensate for the tooth. <sup>28</sup> “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. <sup>29</sup> If, however, the bull has had the 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. <sup>30</sup> However, if payment is demanded of him, he may redeem his life by paying whatever is demanded. <sup>31</sup> This law also applies if the bull gores a son or daughter. <sup>32</sup> 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. <sup>33</sup> “If a man uncovers a pit or digs one and fails to cover it and an ox or a donkey falls into it, <sup>34</sup> the owner of the pit must pay for the loss; he must pay its owner, and the dead animal will be his. <sup>35</sup> “If a man’s bull injures the bull of another and it dies, they are to sell the live one and divide both the money and the dead animal equally. <sup>36</sup> 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.**

**21:13** *if he did not lie in wait.* Related terms and expressions are “accidentally” (Nu 35:11), “without hostility” (Nu 35:22), “was not his enemy” (Nu 35:23), “did not intend to harm him” (Nu 35:23) and “without malice aforethought” (Dt 19:4). Premeditated murder is thus distinguished from accidental manslaughter. (CSB)

*God let him fall into.* The event is beyond human control—in modern legal terminology, an “act of God.” (CSB)

Describes an unintended or accidental act of manslaughter. God does not cause the death but allows it. (TLSB)

*place.* A city of refuge (see Nu 35:6–32; Dt 19:1–13; Jos 20:1–9; 21:13, 21, 27, 32, 38). (CSB)

A city of refuge, where such a person would be safe from retribution from the victim’s family. (TLSB)

**21:14** *take him from my altar.* Or “even from my altar.” The horns of the altar were a final refuge for those subject to judicial action. (CSB)

Not even the ultimate sanctuary (the horns of God’s altar) would protect a person who intentionally murdered another human being. Cf 1Ki 1:49–53. (TLSB)

**21:15–17** Parents represent God’s order; therefore, an attack on mother or father is tantamount to an attack on God’s order. (TLSB)

**21:18–19** Principles of legal liability. The attacker would compensate the victim for lost wages and medical expenses. (TLSB)

**21:19** *walks around outside with his staff.* Is convalescing in a satisfactory way. (CSB)

*the loss of his time.* Lit. “his sitting,” i.e., his enforced idleness. (CSB)

**21:20–21** Benefit of doubt was granted to the slaveholder where no homicidal intentions could be proved. (CSB)

**21:20** *avenged*. Punished in proportion to the crime. (TLSB)

**21:21** *survives a day or two*. The owner was given the benefit of the doubt, and the death would be considered accidental or unintentional. A master was permitted to discipline his slaves physically but not to maim them (they would then immediately go free) or kill them (the master would then be punished). Slaves had greater human rights under God’s Law than under the laws of many nations. (TLSB)

**21:22** *as the woman’s husband shall impose*. The plaintiff (the husband) would sue for damages (set the amount of the suit), and a court would decide the case. (TLSB)

*judges determine*. Elders of the village constituted the community’s judicial body. (TLSB)

**21:23–25** See Dt 19:21. The so-called law of retaliation, as its contexts show, was meant to limit the punishment to fit the crime. By invoking the law of love, Jesus corrected the popular misunderstanding of the law of retaliation (see Mt 5:38–42). (CSB)

*if ... harm ... life for life*. Proportional justice. Equal injury would be inflicted on the attacker. God considers unborn children human beings. (TLSB)

**21:23** *is harm*. Either to mother or to child. (CSB)

**21:26–27** Humane applications of the law of retaliation. (CSB)

**21:28–32, 35–36** The owner of an animal that caused harm for the first time had no way of knowing the animal was dangerous; the owner was relatively free from liability. However, if the animal had shown aggressive inclinations or had previously caused harm, the owner was clearly liable under the law for all damages. (TLSB)

**21:28–32** The law of the goring bull. (CSB)

**21:28** *the ox shall be stoned*. By killing someone, the bull becomes accountable for that person’s life (see Ge 9:5). (CSB)

**21:30** *if ransom is imposed*. If the victim’s family is willing to accept a ransom payment instead of demanding the death penalty. *he may redeem his life by paying*. The payment (lit. “ransom,” as in Nu 35:31) is not to compensate the victim’s family but to save the negligent man’s life. (CSB)

**21:32** *thirty shekels of silver*. Apparently the standard price for a slave. It was also the amount Judas was willing to accept as his price for betraying Jesus (see Mt 26:14–15; see also Zec 11:12–13). (CSB)

**21:1–32** Through Moses, God gives a variety of “guiding decisions,” precedent-setting legislation that would guide Israel’s courts throughout the coming generations. Slavery (vv 1–11) and homicide (vv 12–36) occupy the first two parts of this guide. Because we, God’s people, continue to sin, even though we are justified by faith, we need God’s Law as a guide in life. God’s Law shows that He values all people, including slaves, women, and children (cf Gal 3:26–29). All people are sinners, and our gracious Lord makes His forgiveness available to all. • “My gracious Master and my God, Assist me to proclaim, To spread through all the earth abroad, The honors of Thy name. He breaks the pow’r of canceled sin; He sets the prisoner free. His blood can make the foulest clean; His blood avails for me.” Amen. (LSB 528:2, 4) (TLSB)

*Laws About Restitution*

**33 “When a man opens a pit, or when a man digs a pit and does not cover it, and an ox or a donkey falls into it, 34 the owner of the pit shall make restoration. He shall give money to its owner, and the dead beast shall be his. 35 “When one man's ox butts another's, so that it dies, then they shall sell the live ox and share its price, and the dead beast also they shall share. 36 Or if it is known that the ox has been accustomed to gore in the past, and its owner has not kept it in, he shall repay ox for ox, and the dead beast shall be his.**

**21:33–36** Laws concerning injuries to animals. (CSB)