

Exodus, Part 13

In our last session, we saw the Israelites receive the Decalogue with fear and trembling, but God isn't finished giving the Law yet. We will now get into the details of the Law as God spells out the rest of what this covenant requires. This is the first section of a long speech by the Lord which Moses heard alone, and subsequently recorded.

Although many commentators view this first section concerning the building of altars as part of the detailed legislation that comprises the Book of the Covenant, there are grounds for treating it as distinctive. There is an obvious difficulty in explaining why detailed laws about the altar would have been inserted before the heading in 21:1 "Now these are the rules that you shall set before them." This is best explained by the fact that 20:22–26 records instructions, not detailed legislation, for the building of an altar and the offering of sacrifices. These activities form an essential part of the covenant ratification ceremony described later in 24:4–8.

Laws About Altars

Exodus 20:22 And the Lord said to Moses, "Thus you shall say to the people of Israel: 'You have seen for yourselves that I have talked with you from heaven. ²³ You shall not make gods of silver to be with me, nor shall you make for yourselves gods of gold. ²⁴ An altar of earth you shall make for me and sacrifice on it your burnt offerings and your peace offerings, your sheep and your oxen. In every place where I cause my name to be remembered, I will come to you and bless you. ²⁵ If you make me an altar of stone, you shall not build it of hewn stones, for if you wield your tool on it you profane it. ²⁶ And you shall not go up by steps to my altar, that your nakedness be not exposed on it.'

In verses 22-23 we have a restatement of the first and second commandments concerning the worshiping of any gods other than Yahweh and idolatry. The statement in verse 23 "You shall not make gods of silver to be with me" probably refers to the making of "secondary gods" or idols that would share the worship of Yahweh.

In verse 24 the Lord promises to bless the Israelites if they don't create idols and build proper altars for the Lord, He will bless them. Note that the Lord demands that the altar not be made of "hewn stones". This refers to stones dressed and cut by stone masons. It must be built of available God-given materials and not "enhanced" by human works designed to improve on what God has provided or display any images of idols. The message is that human works and idolatry are rejected by God.

Verses 25 and 26 give details for the building of altars for worship. The proper place to meet God was at the altar. The regulations concerning the altar were these:

1. The altar was to be made of earth or stones.
2. If the altar was made of stone, it was not to be built of dressed stones, i.e., cut stones. The purpose here was to reject human works and avoid any temptation to carve images on the stones of the altar.
3. The altar could be located wherever God caused his name to be honored, i.e., appeared in vision, voice, or action.
4. The altar was not to have steps. If a priest were to climb steps to an altar, his nakedness might be seen. Sacrifice depicted a *covering* of sin; exposed nakedness destroyed that symbolism. Later, God instructed Moses to make linen undergarments for Aaron and his sons so that they might not expose their nakedness in God's presence (to do so would have led to death; 28:42–43).

Laws About Slaves

Exodus 21:1 "Now these are the rules that you shall set before them.

²When you buy a Hebrew slave, he shall serve six years, and in the seventh he shall go out free, for nothing. ³If he comes in single, he shall go out single; if he comes in married, then his wife shall go out with him.

⁴If 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.

⁵But if the slave plainly says, 'I love my master, my wife, and my children; I will not go out free,' ⁶then 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. ⁸If 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.

This is a difficult subject. Many, especially non-Christians, charge that the Bible teaches that slavery is condoned by God based on passages in Scripture. Even some Christians have taken this position, in particular before the American Civil War, and claimed the Bible supported the institution of slavery then practiced in the South. Some claimed that the so-called “curse of Ham” (Genesis 9:25) was to cause Ham’s descendants to be dark-skinned. While it is likely that African peoples are descended from Ham (Cush, Phut, and Mizraim), it is not likely that they are descended from Canaan—upon which the curse was actually declared, not Ham. There is no evidence from Genesis that the curse has anything to do with skin color.

Others suggested that the “mark of Cain” in Genesis 4 was that he was turned dark-skinned. Again, there is no evidence of this in Scripture, and in any case, any direct descendants of Cain’s line were probably wiped out in the Flood unless any of the eight on the Ark were in some way related.

Some argue that such passages justify the belief that some evil or inferiority is associated with dark skin, but that is not to be found in Scripture. Very light skin and very dark skin are from the *extremes* of skin color caused by the minimum and maximum of melanin production. That difference in skin color is more likely the result of genetically selected results of diverging populations after the Tower of Babel incident recorded in Genesis 11.

Neither slavery in New Testament times nor slavery under the Mosaic covenant had anything to do with the sort of slavery where “Black” people were bought and sold as property by “White” people in the well-known slave trade of the last few centuries. Contrary to what you may have been told or think, Scripture in no way validates the practice of harsh slavery in that sense. Slavery in Israel was a very different practice as we shall see. It

was indeed common in Biblical times but usually more resembled what we know as indentured servitude. While Scripture does not condone harsh slavery, it does recognize that it was indeed practiced by some and attempts to regulate it.

No “White” Christian should ever think that they can use any slightly positive comment about slavery in Scripture to justify the historic Slave Trade that is still a major stain on the histories of both the U.S. and U.K. And they were not the only countries in history to delve into harsh slavery and so be stained:

- Ham’s son Mizraim founded Egypt (still called Mizraim in Hebrew). Egypt was the first recorded nation in the Bible to have harsh slavery and it was imposed on Joseph, the son of Israel, in 1728 BC.
- Later, the Egyptians were slave masters to the Israelites, but Moses, by the hand of God, freed them.
- The Israelites were again enslaved by Assyrian and Babylonian captors about 1,000 years later.
- Other ancient nations were also involved in slavery; the Code of Hammurabi discussed it soon after Babel.
- For over 400 years, “Black” Moors enslaved “Whites” during their conquering of Spain and Portugal on the Iberian Peninsula in the 8th century AD. The Moors even took slaves as far north as Scandinavia. The Moorish and Middle Eastern slave market was extensive.
- Norse raiders of Scandinavia enslaved other European peoples and took them back as property beginning in the 8th century AD.
- Even in modern times, slavery is still alive in the Sudan and Darfur, children are enslaved in the lithium mines of Africa, and we have human trafficking of women and children in many parts of the world, including in America.

We find many other examples of harsh slavery in cultures throughout the world. These examples indicate that harsh slavery was/is a reality, and in all cases, is an unacceptable act by biblical standards.

The Jews were allowed to buy and sell servants, but they were forbidden to treat them as slaves. The extreme kindness to be shown to servants commanded in the Bible among the Israelites was often prefaced by a

reminder that they too were slaves at the hands of the Egyptians. In other words, they were to treat slaves/servants in a way that they wanted to be treated.

Slavery as discussed in the Bible is not the same as harsh slavery. Let's look at some background on the subject. Slaves and masters are referred to in Paul's epistles.

Ephesians 6:5 Bondservants, obey your earthly masters with fear and trembling, with a sincere heart, as you would Christ,

Paul equates the service of Hebrew servitude to service to Christ. The word used in Greek is *doulos* /**do**·los/ and means devoted to another to the disregard of one's own interests, a servant, or attendant. They were being paid something and were therefore in a state more akin to an employment contract rather than slavery. Moreover, Paul gives clear instructions that Christian "masters" are to treat such people with respect and as equals. Their employment position did not affect their standing in the church. Again, Paul in Ephesians does not give an endorsement to slavery/bondservants and masters but gives them both the same commands.

Colossians 4:1 Masters, treat your bondservants justly and fairly, knowing that you also have a Master in heaven.

Indentured Servitude

As I previously mentioned, bond servitude in Israel was very different from harsh slavery.

Exodus 21:2 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.

A Hebrew might have to sell himself into service if he could not meet his financial obligations. In such a case, the debtor could not be made to serve more than six years. Verse 2 above assumes the Hebrew is in some sort of bankruptcy and has nothing to sell to settle his debts other than his own labor. He has the option of selling himself into bondage, but as verse 2 indicates, the period of bondage is limited to six years. In the seventh year, he must be released from any obligations. This is a loan repaid by labor. In six years the loan is paid off, and they are set free and owed nothing to the master (he was released “for nothing”). Bondservants who submitted themselves to this form of servitude made a wage, had their debt covered, had a home to stay in, on-the-job training, and did it for only six years. It is a financial contract regulated by the Law.

If the bondservant enters service as a single person, he must exit the contract period single. And if he entered service married, his wife will go with him. If he married a maidservant of his master during the six years, he did so realizing that when he went free his wife and children stayed with his master. The male could leave and abandon his wife and children or remain as a bondservant.

Exodus 21:4 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.

This passage is troubling to me because it seems to reject the sanctity of marriage. Some commentators argue the wife here must be a Canaanite slave and since Hebrews were not to marry them the separation would be sanctioned. Maybe? But what if we were to look at it in the light of the Cross? Jesus, in order to acquire a whole new “family” (the church), submitted Himself completely to the will of the Father (as we see in Philippians 2:4-8), set aside His rights, and died on the Cross? Does this provide husbands with a pattern for how they are to be Christ-like as a husband? To retain the sanctity of the family, the husband must choose to surrender his “rights” and submit himself to Christ. Here’s another thought:

In order to have a wife and children, one must be willing to set aside some of his freedoms.

The passage goes on to say when he is released from service he does not go out “free, for nothing”.

Deuteronomy 15:13 “If your brother, a Hebrew man or a Hebrew woman, is sold to you, he shall serve you six years, and in the seventh year you shall let him go free from you. ¹³ And when you let him go free from you, you shall not let him go empty-handed. ¹⁴ You shall furnish him liberally out of your flock, out of your threshing floor, and out of your winepress. As the Lord your God has blessed you, you shall give to him. ¹⁵ You shall remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the Lord your God redeemed you ...”

The Lord had previously made it clear in Exodus 21:2 that six full years of a person’s life were enough to make up for defaulting on a loan. However, in Deuteronomy Moses added that the employer must do more than free the servant; he must also supply him liberally with livestock, grain, and wine in accord with the way the Lord had blessed him. Remember, we are under the provisions of the Mosaic Covenant here. Disobedience will bring discipline and obedience will bring blessing. The expectation is that the bondservant has been treated fairly and honorably by the master. “As the Lord your God has blessed you, you shall give to him” (v. 14). As a result of treating the bondservant fairly, the master has been blessed and should share that blessing with the bondservant when he is released from his contract.

Deuteronomy 15:16 But if he says to you, ‘I will not go out from you,’ because he loves you and your household, since he is well-off with you, ¹⁷ then you shall take an awl, and put it through his ear into the door, and he shall be your slave forever. And to your female slave you shall do the same.

If a male servant wanted to remain in *permanent* servitude, his request was to be validated by the judges and then one of his ears was to be pierced with an awl to symbolize willing service. A female servant could do the same.

Female Slaves

Exodus 21:7 “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.

Female slaves were treated differently. Many times female slaves were concubines or secondary wives (cf. Gen. 16:3; 22:24; 30:3, 9; 36:12; Jud. 8:31; 9:18). The law protected a female servant who might be sold into servanthood. Normally when this was done, marriage was contemplated, either to the master (“designated her for himself” v. 8) or to his son (“designates her for his son” v. 9). If the master chose not to marry the servant girl, he had to allow her to be redeemed by relatives but could not sell her to a third party. The selling of a daughter may seem cruel, but some Hebrew fathers thought it more advantageous for their daughters to become concubines of well-to-do neighbors than to become the wives of men in their own social class.

If she married her master’s son she was to be given family status (Ex. 21:9). If the master married someone else, he was required to provide his servant with three essentials: food, clothing, and shelter (“marital rights” in Exodus 21:10 probably means living quarters, not sexual privilege). If her master was unwilling to give her these three things, he must release her without compensation to himself.

If a daughter who became a servant was not pleasing to her master, she was to be redeemed by a near kinsman. But a Hebrew was never to be sold to foreigners (Ex. 21:8).

Leviticus 25:47 “If a stranger or sojourner with you becomes rich, and your brother beside him becomes poor and sells himself to the stranger

or sojourner with you or to a member of the stranger's clan, ⁴⁸ then after he is sold he may be redeemed. One of his brothers may redeem him, ⁴⁹ or his uncle or his cousin may redeem him, or a close relative from his clan may redeem him. Or if he grows rich he may redeem himself. ⁵⁰ He shall calculate with his buyer from the year when he sold himself to him until the year of jubilee, and the price of his sale shall vary with the number of years. The time he was with his owner shall be rated as the time of a hired worker. ⁵¹ If there are still many years left, he shall pay proportionately for his redemption some of his sale price. ⁵² If there remain but a few years until the year of jubilee, he shall calculate and pay for his redemption in proportion to his years of service. ⁵³ He shall treat him as a worker hired year by year. He shall not rule ruthlessly over him in your sight. ⁵⁴ And if he is not redeemed by these means, then he and his children with him shall be released in the year of jubilee.”

Passages in Leviticus show us the importance of treating “aliens” and foreigners well, and how, if they believe, they become part of the people of God (for example, Rahab and Ruth, to name but two). Also, the existence of slavery in Leviticus 25 underlines the importance of redemption and enables the New Testament writers to point out that we are slaves to sin, but are redeemed by the blood of Jesus. Such slavery is a living allegory and does not justify the “racist” form of slavery practiced during the 16th to 19th centuries.

Slavery was common in the Middle East as far back as ancient Egypt and probably much earlier. If God had simply ignored it, then there would have been no rules for their treatment and they could have been treated harshly with no rights. But since they did have rights and rules for their protection, it showed that God cared for them as well. However, this is often misconstrued as an endorsement of slavery, which it is not. Note that God listed slave traders among the worst of sinners.

1 Timothy 1:9 understanding this, that the law is not laid down for the just but for the lawless and disobedient, for the ungodly and sinners, for the unholy and profane, for those who strike their fathers and mothers, for murderers, ¹⁰ the sexually immoral, men who practice homosexuality, **enslavers**, liars, perjurers, and whatever else is contrary to sound doctrine

This is not a new teaching, as Moses was not fond of forced slavery either.

Exodus 21:16 “Whoever steals a man and sells him, and anyone found in possession of him, shall be put to death.”

Some Questioned Passages

Those who argue that the Bible condones slavery and even the beating of slaves often cite several passages such as this one in Luke.

Luke 12:43 Blessed is that servant whom his master will find so doing when he comes. ⁴⁴ Truly, I say to you, he will set him over all his possessions. ⁴⁵ But if that servant says to himself, ‘My master is delayed in coming,’ and begins to beat the male and female servants, and to eat and drink and get drunk, ⁴⁶ the master of that servant will come on a day when he does not expect him and at an hour he does not know, and will cut him in pieces and put him with the unfaithful. ⁴⁷ And that servant who knew his master’s will but did not get ready or act according to his will, will receive a severe beating. ⁴⁸ But the one who did not know, and did what deserved a beating, will receive a light beating. Everyone to whom much was given, of him much will be required, and from him to whom they entrusted much, they will demand the more.

This passage is a parable, and parables can be identified by several characteristics: they never use names but rather refer to the actors as “a man,” “a servant,” or “a master”. They also do not identify exact locations but use general terms like “a far country”. They are metaphors designed to teach certain lessons. This parable is teaching about the Second Advent (“master ... when he comes”). Jesus was talking primarily about the leadership of the nation at that time. The religious leaders were supposed to be managing the nation for God until He brought in the kingdom. However, they failed in that task; they were not looking expectantly toward the kingdom. Because of the penalty exacted (vv. 46–47), Jesus must not have been speaking about believers who were not ready. He seems to have been referring to the nation’s leaders who would be present at the time of the coming of the Son of Man. Faithless ones (v. 47) will be judged more severely than those who, though wicked, do not know about the

coming of the Son of Man (v. 48a). Unbelievers with a great knowledge of God's revelation will have to answer for their lack of response to that revelation.

1 Timothy 6:1 Let all who are under a yoke as bondservants regard their own masters as worthy of all honor, so that the name of God and the teaching may not be reviled. ² Those who have believing masters must not be disrespectful on the ground that they are brothers; rather they must serve all the better since those who benefit by their good service are believers and beloved.

Paul doesn't give an endorsement to slavery. He merely gives commands to those who are *already* either masters or bondservants. Again, bondservants (or slaves) were paid a wage and, being brothers in Christ with the believing master, Paul makes it clear that they are equals:

Galatians 3:28 There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.

Ephesians 6:5 Bondservants, obey your earthly masters with fear and trembling, with a sincere heart, as you would Christ, ⁶ not by the way of eye-service, as people-pleasers, but as bondservants of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart, ⁷ rendering service with a good will as to the Lord and not to man, ⁸ knowing that whatever good anyone does, this he will receive back from the Lord, whether he is a bondservant or is free. ⁹ Masters, do the same to them, and stop your threatening, knowing that he who is both their Master and yours is in heaven, and that there is no partiality with him.

Again, Paul in Ephesians does not give an endorsement to slavery. In speaking to bondservants and their masters, he gives them both the same commands. They are to be faithful in the execution of their duties, not in a slothful manner "by the way of eye-service, as people-pleasers" (v. 6) but "as to the Lord and not to man" (v. 7). Such faithful and honest service can expect to be rewarded in eternity.

Colossians 4:1 Masters, treat your bondservants justly and fairly, knowing that you also have a Master in heaven.

Leviticus 25:53 He shall treat him as a worker hired year by year. He shall not rule ruthlessly over him in your sight.

The Bible does not condone slavery but does recognize its existence among fallen men and attempts to regulate it. Under the Mosaic Covenant God provided a system of bonded servitude that those who were destitute for whatever reason could find a means to pay off their debts and return to solvency by “selling” themselves into indentured service for six years. In the seventh year, they were to be released from service. Whatever blessings the master had received during their service were to be shared with the servant when he left service.

This system was often used by families to find husbands for daughters, especially if the family was poor. The family would be compensated for the daughter sold into such indentured service and she would enjoy certain benefits. These women were usually entering into this agreement as wives or concubines of the master or his sons. As such they were to be given the same benefits as a traditional wife.

The system in Israel was not perfect, but considering the times, it served its purpose by providing a way to help the poor and perhaps even allow them to climb the social ladder. It recognized the reality of fallen men and attempted to mitigate the negative trends of the sin nature by regulating the institution through the Law and even providing for potential blessings for the debtor and the master.

A few pointers to remember:

1. Slaves under Mosaic Law were different from the harshly treated slaves of other societies and were more like indentured servants or bondservants.
2. The Bible doesn't give an endorsement of slave traders but quite the opposite (1 Timothy 1:10).
3. Under the Law, a slave/bondservant was acquired when a person voluntarily entered into bondage when he needed to pay off his debts.
4. Israelites could sell themselves as a slave/bondservant to have their debts covered, make a wage, have housing, and be set free after six

years. Foreigners could also sell themselves as a slave/
bondservant.

5. The Bible recognizes that slavery is a reality in this sin-cursed world and doesn't ignore it, but instead gives regulations for good treatment by both masters and servants and reveals they are equal under Christ.
6. Biblical Christians led the fight to abolish slavery in 19th century America and England.

And we should remember that for the one in debt, the alternative was the debtor's prison.