

This passage in Exodus might at first seem to have nothing to say to us today, but we must remember that **All Scripture is given inspiration of God and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work.** (II Timothy 3:16-17)

- For all Scripture is given by inspiration – not just our favourite passages.
- And all Scripture is profitable – for instructing us, rebuking us, correcting us and training us in righteousness.

After God gave the 10 commandments from the top Mt. Sinai, He gave to Israel a number of laws which we find in Exodus 21-23. These laws are called **the Book of the Covenant** (Exodus 24:7). These laws apply the 10 commandments to very specific situations and cases of life. In these laws the LORD teaches His people how to worship God, and how to love their neighbors. He teaches them how to protect their neighbor's gift of liberty, their neighbor's gift of life, and their neighbor's gift of private property. We must stand under this passage in faith and let God speak to us here today.

1. Here we learn kind of Saviour our God is.

The LORD said to Moses: **Now these are the judgments which you shall set before them** (Exodus 21:1). When He rescued them from slavery in the land of Egypt, He did not set them free to live as they please. He set them free to serve Him and on one another. He saved them to live a loving and orderly life. As the LORD told Moses to say to Pharaoh: **Let my people go that they may serve Me.** The same is true for us today: The Lord Jesus saved us to serve Him. That is one of the reasons He gave us His Law.

The Book of the Covenant covers every aspect of daily life in Israelite society: it covers things like worship, treatment of slaves, injuries, property protection, sex, treatment of aliens, widows and orphans, tithes, treatment of animals, and sabbath laws. The LORD who saved His people calls them to obey Him in every area of life. There is no square inch of our lives over which Jesus our Saviour does not say: *This is mine.*

These laws still speak to us today. Though the form of these laws has changed, the substance and truth of them remain with us in Christ, and carry authority for how we should live our lives. Jesus said: **Do not think that I came to destroy the Law or the prophets. I did not come to destroy but to fulfill.** (Matthew 5:17). He also said: **It is easier for heaven and earth to pass away than for one dot of the Law to become void.** (Luke 16:17)

2. Notice how the LORD recognized the slaves in His Law.

We are looking now at just the first section of the Book of the Covenant: how *Israel's God and Saviour protects the Gift of Liberty He gave to His people.* It speaks of the proper treatment of the lowest members of Israelite society: **slaves.** By God's grace they were to enjoy rights and freedoms before the LORD and before man, even though they were bound to their earthly masters.

We also learn a lot about God in the place where God begins His laws about life in society. After starting with worship in 20:22-26 (because love for God must always come before everything else), He quickly turns to our love for neighbor in chapter 21-23, for **the one who loves God must love his brother also** (I John 4:21b). And the neighbor God starts with is the lowest person in Israelite society: the slaves.

This section deals with God's concern for the proper treatment of slaves (or servants). **If you buy a Hebrew servant, he shall serve 6 years; and in the 7<sup>th</sup> he shall go out free and pay nothing.** (Exodus 21:2)

This is not slavery as we have come to know it. The slave trade of African Americans was wicked, and not tolerated by the Bible. Look ahead to verse Exodus 21:16: **He who kidnaps a man and sells him, or if he is found in his hand, shall surely be put to death.** Such slavery is a capital crime. This evil continues today with millions and millions of sex slaves and drug slaves and soldier slaves, many of them children.

But these were indentured slaves or servants, that is, slaves by contract. If a man could not pay his bills, he could sell himself or one of his children in order to pay his debt. This person would then be bought and would live with the family of the master who bought him or her. That slave served as a nanny or a farm labourer. He was not free to leave that farm until the contract was up. We might mock such economies as barbaric or sinful, but every economy has some way of binding people to pay their bills, and modern forms are not always more free than these!

In both the Old and New Testament we read of slavery among God's people. Freedom was prized; but slavery in itself was not condemned (only merciless slavery was). This also teaches us something about the way our God works in our world. He does not call us to revolution, that is, to overthrow the social order in order to make things better; he calls us to reformation, to be better persons within the social order to bring about change.

And so also with slavery. It was part of the social order of that day. Israel was not unique in *that* sense. But it was to be unique in a *different* sense: the way slaves were treated was to be radically different from other cultures. They had been saved by God's grace, and now they were live by grace, and be gracious in the way they treated even the people with the lowest social standing. We still have today some of the law codes of the ancient peoples who lived around that time, and the laws of Israel are far different when it comes to the dignity and respect with which slaves were to be treated. God's slaves had protection!

And this principle has not changed for God's people at all. The lowest member of society has as much value and dignity in the eyes of God as the highest member of society. This is true especially among the members of His own covenant household. There is a tendency for people of higher social standing, education, knowledge, and skill to look down on those who have less, so the LORD begins his laws about neighbor love with concern about the lowest!

In the body of Christ today we may have all different social standings, but we are all equal in the eyes of God and should not think of ourselves as higher than another. The slaves in God's covenant were not stuck in the fine print of His Law. Jesus, who became a slave for us to pay the debt we owe to God, taught us this: whoever would be great among you must become the slave of all (Mk 9:35). And he who is least among you all is the one who is great." (Luk 9:48)

In the book of Philemon, Onesimus, the slave, has run away from his master, Philemon, and must return, says the apostle Paul. He must go back to his master and serve faithfully. But Philemon must treat Onesimus as a Christian brother; though not equal in social standing they were to fellowship as those with equal spiritual standing, for they were both redeemed by the death of Jesus Christ. They were both slaves to sin who had been redeemed by Christ who died for sin to set us free.

We're all in the same place in the covenant of God's grace – BY GRACE ALONE. The Lord commands us to **be willing to associate with those of low position** (Romans 12:16). For, says Paul – and this was truly radical in Roman society which made much of the separation of classes – **There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.** (Gal. 3:28)

3. We notice in these laws how Israel's Saviour required the slaves to be treated with mercy and compassion.

- a. First, slavery was not to be permanent. **If you buy a Hebrew servant he shall serve 6 years; and in the 7<sup>th</sup> he shall go out free and pay nothing.** (Exodus 21:2) The longest you could be required to stay as a servant under a master was 6 years, but in the 7<sup>th</sup> year you could go free, without paying anything! In fact, we learn in the book of Deuteronomy that the master could not send the slave away empty-handed; he had to fill his arms with grain and wine and meat. (Deuteronomy 15:13).
- b. A family was not to be forced to break apart. You could take your wife with you into slavery and then she would go out with you again (v. 3). If the master gave you a wife, she belonged to the Master together with the children she bore, and the servant could not take her with him when his day of freedom arrived (v. 4) However, he was entitled to remain with his master, and his wife and children. He would have his ear pierced against the doorpost of the house, and that blood on the post tied that man to his master for life. **I love my master, my wife, and children; I will not go out free.** (v. 5-6)
- c. Maidservants were to be treated fairly and kindly too. **And if a man sells His daughter to be a female slave, she shall not go out as the male slaves do. If she does not please her master who betrothed her to himself, then he shall let her be redeemed. He shall have no right to sell her to a foreign people, since he has dealt deceitfully with her. And if he has betrothed her to his son, he shall deal with her according to the custom of daughters.** (Exodus 21:7-8). A poor man might sell his daughter to a household as a nanny or field-worker. Or, if they could not afford to pay a dowry for their daughters, they might even sell her to a master so she could become his concubine or wife, or so she could be given to the master's son as a wife. If she was sold she must stay with her master. But if her master didn't like her, she had special protection under God's Law. He was not free to sell her to foreigners, because that would be breaking faith with her. She must be allowed to be **redeemed** – bought back by a relative and set free again. And if she pleased him enough that he would give her to his son in marriage, **he must deal with her according to the custom of daughters.** He must treat her as no less than his own daughter.
- d. Marital rights: (Exodus 21:10-11) **If he takes another wife, he shall not diminish her food, her clothing and her marriage rights. And if he does not do these three for her, then she shall go out free, without paying money.**

Let us first of all understand that these laws did not make it right for a husband to act in this sinful way. Later when the Lord Jesus talked about laws governing divorce, he said that these laws were necessary because of the hardness of our hearts, but God did not make marriage this way in the beginning. In the new covenant Jesus poured out His Spirit upon us and calls us to a higher standard.

But even in these terribly broken situations in Israel, where a married woman was being neglected, the Lord of mercy stepped in with His Word! If the son who was given the maidservant as his wife rejected or divorced her and went off to marry another woman, he has to continue to support and provide for that maidservant he married. ) If he did not provide

her with these three things, she was to be set free without paying any money for her freedom. Exploitation and neglect of these poor maidservants were not permitted even in these broken situations. The mercy of God who saved His people from slavery must reach even these! You see here how the Lord reaches His hand into very difficult family situations and takes care of His hurting children.

We learn here in very practical ways what God commands of a husband toward his wife: that he provide her food, clothing, and marital rights of affection and children (if God so blesses them). As Paul says in Ephesians 5: The husband must **feed her and care for her as his own body!** These were radical provisions of mercy and kindness in that culture. Even though we think of our culture as very advanced in the treatment of women, we see more and more how exploited they are, and so often discarded and left to fend for themselves. The Gospel of Christ – the Gospel of freedom for slaves, the Gospel of showing mercy to the oppressed and neglected – is a light that shines in the darkness. Let us show that in our own homes!

Slaves in Israel were not to be viewed as mere property. Property rights are considered in a separate part of this passage (see Exodus 21:33-22:15). They were to be respected as fully human. In the book of Leviticus these laws are given in more detail. There the LORD says: **And if one of your brethren who dwells by you becomes poor and sells himself to you, you shall not compel him to serve as a slave. As a hired servant and a sojourner he shall be with you, and shall serve you until the year of Jubilee.... You shall not rule over him with severity, but you shall fear your God.** (Leviticus 25:39-40, 43). When a man became poor and sold himself as a slave, the master must not treat the man as a slave.

And what was the reason The LORD gave for showing such mercy? **For the children of Israel are servants to Me; they are My servants whom I brought out of the land of Egypt. I am the LORD your God!** (Leviticus 25:55) **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 today.** (Deuteronomy 15:15) In other words: You must treat slaves as My people, not your own. You must be merciful to your servants as I showed mercy to you when you were in slavery. Let the Gospel of mercy make you a merciful person!

How much more true is that for today in the new covenant, now that Jesus has come, and has set us free from slavery to sin, and brought us to Himself. Christ has come not to destroy the law and the prophets but to fulfil them. Though the social order has changed, and the forms of these laws have changed for us in the new covenant, the truth and substance of these laws of justice and mercy continue in Christ. This is God's Word. It is sweet as honey. It is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting, and training us today in employer-employee, husband-wife, and parent-child relationships today. The requirement of mercy continues today:

- **Masters, treat your slaves justly and fairly, knowing that you also have a Master in heaven.** (Colossians 3:22-4:1)
- **Behold, the wages of the laborers who mowed your fields, which you kept back by fraud, are crying out against you, and the cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord of hosts.** (James 5:4)

And he urges slaves to serve their masters well with hard work. Why? Not because they are slaves, but because they are free in the eyes of the Lord. He has set them free from sin to serve Him. **For he who was called in the Lord as a slave is a freedman of the Lord. Likewise he who was free when called is a slave of Christ.** (1Co 7:22)

4. We notice in these laws also how our Saviour prizes the freedom of His people

This passage rings clearly with the sounds of the freedom we have in the Lord. No, not the freedom to do what we please, but the freedom we have to serve the Lord who set us free. It is also a freedom we have been given to serve our neighbor, that our neighbour too may experience and taste in our dealings the freedom we have in our Saviour. Our Lord is the Lord of Jubilee – **in the 7<sup>th</sup> year he shall go out free, and pay nothing!** (2)

For this people belongs to **the LORD who brought them out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery**. He had paid for their sins with the blood of the Passover Lamb, and rescued them from slavery to that tyrant, Pharaoh. That salvation and that deliverance must mark their society and govern all their relationships! And then think of the greater deliverance God has given us not through Moses but through Jesus Christ – what freedom should mark our lives and relationships!

This passage speaks of two problems: debt and slavery. Jesus came to earth to free us from both of these.

Jesus set us free from our slavery by paying the debt of our sin. When we were under God's condemnation and wrath because of all the love and obedience which we owe to God and have not paid, the LORD God sent His Son into slavery in order to pay what we owe! He placed our debts on Christ and put Him in our slavery to set us free. Jesus **made Himself of no reputation and took the form of a bondservant** (see Philippians 2:7). He was sold to His enemies for 30 pieces of silver, the price of a slave. And by believing in Jesus, our debt of righteousness which we owe to God is paid in full! We are righteous in Christ and free from condemnation!

Jesus set us free not only from the debt of our sin with His blood, but also from our slavery to the power of sin. Sin is that evil tyrant that controls us and beats us up like Pharaoh's taskmasters. **For we ourselves were once foolish, disobedient, led astray, slaves to various passions and pleasures, passing our days in malice and envy, hated by others and hating one another. But when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, He saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to His own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit.** (Titus 3:3-5). Jesus also set us free from the oppressive slavery into which our sin brought us.

And now in Christ, through faith in Him, we are free! It is a freedom to serve one another, to become, as it were slaves to one another, to help them live freely. **For freedom Christ has set us free; stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.** (Galatians 5:1) **For you were called to freedom, brothers. Only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another.** (Gal 5:13)

There is an example in Exodus 21 that is a wonderful picture of the Christian life! A man was finished his years of service, and his Master set him free. And what did he do with His freedom? Well, his Master was such a kind and merciful man that the freed man said: **I love my master and my wife and my children and do not want to go free!** And how did he use his freedom? He committed himself to a life of slavery to his good master, and under him, to enjoy his life with his wife and children! Willingly! Such a good Master is Jesus Christ! He is no Pharaoh who drives you into the ground and oppresses you. He is not a Master like alcohol or drugs which suck the life right out of you until you lose your job, then your wife, and then your life. He is a Master whom to serve is great freedom and delight! Slavery to Jesus is freedom to live, freedom to enjoy your life and your wife. He does not take them away from you; he gives them back to you!

Has Christ set you free from your sins? Commit your life to Him as His slave. Get your ear pierced. Go to the door of God your Saviour and Master who bought you with His precious blood, who loved you so much that he gave His life for you, and offer your life to Him as a sacrifice of thanksgiving. Put your ear against his doorpost, and ask him to pierce your ear, so your blood is on His house. This is a symbolic way of saying: My life, my blood is yours! I am your servant forever!

I will serve you and your household forever!

**But thanks be to God, that you who were once slaves of sin have become obedient from the heart to the standard of teaching to which you were committed, and, having been set free from sin, have become slaves of righteousness.** (Romans 6:17-18)