

Prayer

Jesus Christ our Saviour, we offer you these promises in faith:
We will worship You in every way open to us throughout this day;
We will live by the truth of Your Word implanted within our hearts;
We will follow You through danger by the guidance of Your counsel;
We will believe that You can help us achieve what appears impossible;
Because the song You have placed in our hearts speaks of glory. ALLELUIA!

Prayer Suggestions

Prayer ideas

Look around your home, and make a note of those things that have great meaning for you. Offer these feelings to your God, and seek His will.

On-going prayers

- **Pray for the police.** *Pray for all who bear the responsibility of keeping your neighbourhood safe*
- *Give thanks to God for the blessing of sleep and rest*
- *Pray for the United Kingdom as its citizens important choices in the coming general election*

Meditation

Dedicated is the life directed by the Spirit;
Jesus, take my hands in Yours.
Strong is the heart inspired by holiness;
Jesus, purify my heart.

Healthy are the feelings fed by godliness;
Jesus, liberate my emotions.
Powerful is the mind tutored by the Bible;
Jesus, feed me from the Word.

Visionary is the spirit that recognises prophecy;
Jesus, reveal Your Word through me.
Eloquent are the lips that declare the Gospel;
Jesus, use me to preach Good News.

Firm are the feet walking the paths of Faith;
Jesus, guide me on the way.
Infinite is the potential of the work of the Lord;
Jesus, use me according to Your will.

Bible passage – Exodus 21:1-11

¹ You shall place before them these rules:

² When you buy a Hebrew slave, he will serve six years, but in the seventh he will go free, without payment. ³ If he comes in by himself, he will leave by himself; but if as a husband to a wife, then his wife will go out with him. ⁴ If his master gives him a wife and she bears him sons or daughters, the woman and her children will belong to her master and he will leave alone.

⁵ But if the slave clearly says, 'I love my master, my wife, and my children; I will not go free,' ⁶ then his master will bring him before God. He will bring him to the door or the doorpost; and his master will pierce his ear with an awl, and he will serve him thereafter.

⁷ If a man sells his daughter as a maid-servant, she shall not leave as the male slaves do. ⁸ If she does not please her master, who selected her for himself, then he must let her be redeemed; he does not have the right to sell her to a different family, since he has broken faith with her. ⁹ If he selects her for his son, he shall deal with her as with a daughter. ¹⁰ If he subsequently takes for himself another wife, he must not diminish the food, clothing, or marital rights of the first wife; ¹¹ and if he does not do these three things for her, she may go free, without payment of money.

Bible Study

Review

After God's incredible descent onto Mount Sinai and the giving of the Ten Commandments, Exodus moves on to give us more Old Testament 'law'. Quite naturally, we may be somewhat apprehensive about this and anticipate that it will be boring and tedious. However, it is very interesting, and our passage begins to describe how God's moral law, as found in the Ten Commandments, was applied to the social life of Israel, especially to the poorest people, the slaves. After dealing with worship (20:22-26), God's first priority was social justice!

Today, we know little about how the people of Israel lived in the desert, but we should be careful to note to what is known. Life was dominated by large extended families, and other Israelites and foreigners lived in the service to these families, in a form of bonded labour. Such life could be harsh but not by the standards of the day. Our passage defines a regulatory system for bonded labour, accounting differently for the needs of the men and women who lived at the bottom of the social pile. Male servants were valued for their capacity to work, and female slaves were valued both for their work and for their capacity to bear children, as reflected in these laws. Male leaders of households had the right to take female slaves as wives (21:8), or designate them as future wives for sons in line for inheritance (21:9). This would have been a wise investment, saving the cost of 'bride price' at a later date!

Behind the rules for male bonded slaves lie Sabbath principles. Slaves were contracted for six years only, with release on the seventh (21:2). A slave was regarded as an investment, so he was allowed to leave as he came, whether single or married (2:3). The case of a man who married during his terms of service was more complex (2:4f.), because the wife had been given by the master and was still his legal responsibility. It was therefore right to take account of this at the end of the period of contracted labour (2:4). It seems likely that a master would only have allowed his slave to only marry if the matter of what happened at the end of the contract had already been agreed beforehand, and the slave agreed to stay (with his wife) with the master. Such an agreement was established by the ritual act of 'ear-piercing', which may be why this ceremony is described immediately after verse 4 (21:5,6). Today, we measure investment and wealth in terms of cash, but in those days, it was measured in people and potential to work. The rules reflect this in a far more humane way than we might assume at first reading.

The laws concerning female slaves were different. Although they could work and leave in the same way as men, they were likely to become the wives of one or other member of the extended family for whom they worked. This looks to us like sex-slavery, but in the more close knit communities of Israel, it was a safe and protected form of life for women at the bottom of the social pile, far safer than prostitution, as found elsewhere (e.g. see Joshua 2,6). Importantly, if a man mistreated a woman or rejected her, she had the right to be brought back by her original family and not traded on to others (21:8). Also, if she was purchased as a bride for a future son she, would inherit the elevated rights of a daughter. Lastly, if a man took her and then married again, he was obliged to treat her with complete equality, or she could claim her freedom (21:10,11)!

The liberality and fairness of these laws is inspiring. We may not like the social norms of those times, but we can hardly claim that we have found the right way to protect the life of men and women at the bottom of the social pile, or the right way to protect women within marriage. In most societies today, women and the poor suffer most. But in Israel at least, they were protected by the impressive laws of God.

Going Deeper

The Bible study goes deeper to look at these issues:

- What does this passage mean by 'rules' (21:1)
- Why was it right for a wife to be retained when a man was set free (21:4)?
- What is the significance of ear piercing? (21:6)
- Why are women treated differently to men (21:7-10)

- Under what circumstances might a woman go free?

Notes on the text and translation

- V1** **'these rules'** *Different Bible versions translate the Hebrew word 'mishpat' variously, as ordinances, judgements, laws or decisions. The word 'mishpat' refers to a decision that decides a case, as a judge might give. I prefer 'rules' because this is a readily understandable word that means something that is very important, but less fundamental than 'laws'. For further discussion, see study.*
- V2** **'slave'** *The Hebrew word here is 'eved', which means a bonded servant. There is no single word in English that can be quickly understood as meaning this type of household servant. However, because Exodus describes what amounts to slavery, however benevolently, I have retained the word 'slave'.*
- V3** **'if he comes in by himself ...'** *The Hebrew expression is very basic; 'if his body comes in', which effectively means 'with nothing else'. Hence, he comes in with no property, possessions or family ties.*
- V5** **'clearly says'** *The Hebrew expression here translates as this; 'saying he says ...' This is a way of giving emphasis, and in this case, it indicates the clear intent of the one speaking.*
- V6** **'then his master will bring him before God ...'** *You will find that some Bible versions have 'bring him before the judges (e.g. the NIV). The uncertainty is caused by a peculiar use of the Hebrew word 'elohim', which is usually used for God, but can in some cases refer to judges or rulers in general. However, because the 'definite article' (the word 'the') is placed before 'elohim' in this verse (an unusual occurrence), it is thought by most translators that this could well be a short form of 'the place where God dwells'. There is no clear proof of this, however, so I have kept to the traditional way of translating the verse.*
- V7** **'maid-servant'** *This means a woman sold in the expectation that she will be married or be a 'concubine'. For this reason, she is protected by the law in a different way to male slaves. For the meaning of this, see study.*
- V8** **'sell her to a different family'** *Most Bible versions translate the Hebrew literally as 'sell her to a foreign people'. However, in the context of this domestic matter, a 'foreign people' is not a matter of national identity but of local identity. As soon as we realise this, the whole sentence makes more sense.*

Going Deeper

What does this passage mean by 'rules' (21:1)

It is worth noting that the whole passage is begun by using the word 'rules', rather than 'law' or 'commandment'. As in every language, there are a number of different words in Hebrew for different aspects of the legal process. In most countries today, governments pass 'laws', which are the basic principles upon which society works. In some countries, parliaments or democratic representative bodies pass them, but in countries where there are dictators, they are 'commanded'. In God's world, of course, His laws are given by commandment, and God spoke the Ten Commandments in Exodus 20 as the basic principles of His moral world.

Now that the people of Israel had complained that they could not continue to bear God speak to them directly, Moses acted to pass on God's further instructions (20:18f.) and this is what begins here in chapter 21. The Hebrew word 'mishpat' (see notes above for verse 1) is the word used for 'rules', and it is well known in the Hebrew Bible because it frequently denotes God's justice. Certainly, if the rest of Exodus continued to give laws similar to what we have read today, then we might be entitled to translate verse 1 'you shall place before them this justice'!

In reality, justice is a decision taken for what is right. So, the rules we read today (21:1-11) are God's decisions about how to deal 'rightly' with the social system that the people of Israel had at the time He adopted them. As we read on beyond this, we will find that we are reading God's 'just decisions' about a range of other social situations; but here, he starts with the poorest of the poor. The slaves. We may not like the idea of slavery in Israel, but at least, they were the first people to benefit from God's 'justice'!

Why was it right for a wife to be retained when a man was set free (21:4)?

The short answer to this is that from our perspective it would be wrong, but from the perspective of the ancient Israelites, it was entirely the right thing to do. This is important, because unless we read the Bible with this degree of understanding, then some will take a section of the 'law' such as this and seek to apply it

directly and quite inappropriately to people today. But this law is a 'mishpat', and judgement of God for the times.

God's rules gave an extraordinary level of protection to male slaves, starting with the principle of Sabbath, adapted to the labour market (21:2). A male slave was bonded to work for six years and would have all his needs met for food and housing (tent); he was free to go in the seventh year, and he was allowed to leave as he came, whether single or married. A master of a household would have to factor in the cost of a wife and possible children if he was taken on as a married man in the first place (2:3).

A different situation arose if the master gave a man a wife whilst he was working, for the woman represented a cost investment to the master. In normal life, a bride came with a price, and if given to a slave, the master would not receive that price and for this reason she was still technically his (2:4). The released but married slave therefore had two options, the first of which is not mentioned in scripture, but is attested elsewhere in ancient texts. This was to pay the bride price to the master and so take his wife and family with him when he left. No problem was caused by this, for the master received the cost of his investment. However, the majority of bonded slaves had no means of finding money for a bride-price, so to keep the family together, they had to accept the alternative, and this meant accepting permanent bondage (2:5,6), an arrangement most likely to have been pre-arranged, as we have already seen.

What is the significance of ear piercing (21:26)

It is not clear to us now, but it is thought that after the Tabernacle and the shrine of the Ark was made, the ritual of ear piercing was done in this way. The two men came to God at the Ark and made a solemn agreement before priests, and either at the doorposts of the Ark (in reality, tent-posts) or back at the doorposts of the home where the servant would live out his life (also tent-posts), the ear piercing was performed. The ear was significant. Touching or marking the ear was a sign of ownership, and priests were ordained by touching the lobe of their ears with the blood of sacrifices (Exodus 29:20, Lev 14:14f.)

Why are women treated differently to men (21:7-10)

We treat equality between the sexes as important today, and tend to dislike the manner in which women were identified in ancient society by child-bearing capacity as much as ability to work. However, when there was no such thing as birth control, it was right to account for the child bearing aspects of a woman's life. Certainly, if their own sexual needs were to be met as well as men's, then they would bear many children in their lifetime, and sometimes under dangerous conditions. It was right that men should offer women the fullest protection, as the 'rules' in this passage require.

The first indication of the difference between male and female slaves is in the word translated here as 'maid-servants'. It is the same word used of Bilhah and Leah, Jacob's concubines; they were working servants who also had a sexual relationship with their master (Gen 30). However, there was progress in the understanding of marriage between the times of the forefathers and our passage here. The words speak of 'maid-servants' and 'concubines', but the text requires a master of the house to act with care and discretion towards one wife. He is entitled to buy the daughter of another man as a wife (21:7), which is the normal practice of the day, but because the original contract is for marriage and not work, the woman cannot not leave after six years, she will be married!

The text continues from this scenario. If the woman 'does not please' the man, then she is protected immediately; she can be redeemed, bought back by the original family, and this can be done with the money gained from selling her! We might have expected some male rules protecting the right of the man to do what he wants with a woman, for this would be expected in ancient societies, but this is not the case. Furthermore, the man who has acted dishonourably in this way has no right to profit from the woman by selling her on (21:8); we can only assume that this practice was known, but outlawed by God; and there are harsh words for the man, for 'he has broken faith with her' (21:8). Alternatively, a woman may have been bought as a 'maidservant' and as a wife for the son of a master at a later date (21:9), a practice known even to this day, but it was far more understandable and humane in ancient society than now.

The final rule is against the man and determines the price he must pay if he seeks another wife (21:10). This is clear; he must provide three things, food, clothing and continued marital (sexual) rights to the woman if her family does not redeem her! In view of the fact that the food mentioned in this text is meat, the rules make it clear that the woman's lifestyle must not be allowed to deteriorate just because she is not the favoured wife! It may not have been forbidden for a man to have more than one wife, but the penalty of doing this was considerable!

Under what circumstances might a woman go free?

In the last verse, the passage mentions 'three things' which must be provided for a woman if she is not favoured. From the logic of the previous verse, this would be food, clothing and marital rights. However, there is one other possibility. The complexities of the Hebrew make it just possible that the man should

provide the purchased 'maid-servant' with three choices of lifestyle. To be properly and fully married with full rights in the family home, or if rejected by the man, to be provided for at his own expense to the standard of a complete marriage, or to be set free through redemption by her family. This latter interpretation is an impressive conclusion to the treatment of women in Israelite society. If only the men of Israel had kept this law, they would not have been baying at Moses to force him to give the much debated 'permission for divorce' (Deuteronomy 24:1f.), which created havoc even up to the days of Jesus (Matt 19:7f.).

Application

This passage is a strong challenge to God's people today to see that God cares first for those who the world places at the bottom of the human pile; indeed, He is most concerned to protect them and see that their situation is alleviated and made humane. Over the centuries, men and women have organised themselves in vastly differing social structures, and each of us can hardly imagine the range of these that still exist across the world. God is not interested in applying the same 'rules' to everyone, as if this particular scripture could cure all the social ills of society. He is interested in applying moral justice to all, which today means care for the poor, the enslaved, the child sex slaves and every category of individual, male or female that is abused throughout the world. It would not take too much imagination for us to see how it is possible to apply the same godliness found in this scripture, to sex slave workers in the Far East today, for example. Of course, such things can often be achieved only through people in those countries, but why should we stand back from canvassing for what is morally right, and seeking to engage all who love God and claim the name of Jesus in such fights for justice?

The other impressive feature of this text is that it applies the same moral principles of justice and care to both men and women. The basic principles of justice are the same for both, but the application is different for men and women as befits the practical and social differences of the time. Surely, by the grace of God we can find a way not simply to treat men and women equally in terms of 'justice', but treat them differently in terms of what is right for women, and what is right for men? When married, both still live with differing roles within a family; their needs are 'the same but different'. In seeking to apply God's justice today, surely we can perceive that many women are still not receiving justice in our world today, but also accept that many men are failing to grasp their true roles and responsibilities in society and family life. The Christian message is surely that God understands male and female, and He can teach us how to overcome the clear problems between men and women in society today, even though they are considerably different from the problems of the ancient Israelites living in the desert!

Discipleship

Questions (for use in groups)

1. Discuss in your group what it must have been like to be a slave / maid-servant in ancient Israel.
2. How can we apply God's justice to the problems between men and women in today's society?
3. How can we apply God's justice to the appalling treatment of men and women in different ways throughout the world today?

Personal comments by author

When I think of the working conditions of children, men and women in various parts of the world today, mostly in the name of cheap labour and easy profit for people who live in luxury, I am ashamed as a Christian. The laws of God revealed in the Old Testament may be very ancient, but they show principles of justice and mercy that far outstrip the easy capitalism adopted by many economies today in the name of progress. There is a need for Christians to engage with politics in our world today, and the sooner they do, the better.

Ideas for exploring discipleship

- *Research something of what is happening around the world amongst the poorest and most disadvantaged people. Look up what people do to make a living, whether growing poppies in Afghanistan or scrabbling on rubbish tips in Latin America. Let God speak to you through this research.*
- *Pray that God will raise up Christian politicians and leaders who will do God's will in the world today and reform laws that permit social division and injustice.*

Final Prayer

Be at the centre of my life, Lord Jesus. Be with me when I am hurting and when I am fulfilled, when I am empty and when I am full to overflowing, when I am troubled and when I feel as free as a bird. But most of all, Lord Jesus, come close when nothing particular is happening, for then we may hear you most clearly. Thank You, Lord Jesus: AMEN
