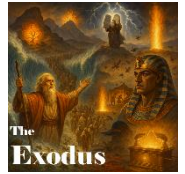




Ordered Justice in an Unordered World Exodus 21:1-36 (Lesson #22)



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

With this verse, the narrative shifts from the direct revelation of the Decalogue to the detailed stipulations of what is traditionally called **“the Book of the Covenant”**. While the Ten Words were spoken directly by God to the assembled nation (Exod 20:1), the laws that follow are delivered **through Moses**, who acts as **covenant mediator**. These are the rules that you shall set before them.

The term “rules” is **הַמִּשְׁפָּטִים** (*ha-mishpatim*), means *judgments, ordinances, or legal decisions*. These laws provide Israel’s magistrates with **precedents** for rendering judgments in civil and social disputes. They translate the theological principles of the Decalogue into **concrete life situations**.

Scholars commonly observe that the covenant given at Sinai includes far more than the Ten Commandments. The section from Exodus 21–23 contains roughly **60 additional stipulations**, bringing the total to about **70 commands** included in the covenant document (Exod 24:7).

These ordinances address an impressive range of topics—personal injury, property damage, slavery, marriage, restitution, justice, Sabbath rhythms, and neighborly responsibility. Their breadth shows that God is not concerned only with “religious” behavior but with the everyday social fabric of His covenant people.

Vs 2-4 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.

These ordinances move immediately into the social structure of Israel as a nation. Israel is no longer a people **enslaved under harsh Egyptian tyranny**; they are now a **free covenant nation**, and therefore their treatment of the vulnerable—including slaves—must reflect the character of their Redeemer.

It is vital to understand that the “slavery” described here—**עֶבֶד** (*‘eved*), often translated *slave* or *servant*—was not equivalent to the race-based, lifelong chattel slavery familiar from modern history.

Israel did have slaves from foreign nations, usually the result of warfare (Lev 25:44–46).

But **Hebrews were not allowed to enslave fellow Hebrews permanently**. The law strictly limited the duration and harshness of service and built-in protections for the dignity of the servant.

Charles Spurgeon summarizes the purpose of these laws well:

“Moses did not institute slavery in any shape; the laws concerning it were made on purpose to repress it, to confine it within very narrow bounds, and ultimately to put an end to it.”

This fits the biblical pattern: God often regulates existing cultural structures in a way that limits human sin and moves His people toward greater justice and holiness.

There are four ways a Hebrew could become a servant to another Hebrew. Only under these rare but specific circumstances, almost all of them economic or judicial could a Hebrew become a slave to a fellow Hebrew:

1. **Extreme poverty** — selling one's labor to survive (Lev 25:39).
2. **A father arranging a daughter's marriage** — placing her in another household with the expectation she would eventually become a wife there (Ex 21:7–11).
3. **Bankruptcy** — repaying a debt through labor (2 Kgs 4:1).
4. **Restitution for theft** — when a thief lacked the means to repay (Ex 22:3–4).

Thus, servanthood was **not forbidden**, but it was tightly regulated to protect human dignity.

It is striking—and revealing of God's heart—that **the very first laws** given after the Ten Words deal with justice for slaves. This speaks volumes about God's concern for the vulnerable.

Important rules and principles for Hebrew servants:

1. **The Hebrew slave serves only six years.** The servant must be released in the seventh year **without payment**. This aligns with the Sabbath principle woven throughout Israel's life.
2. **A single man leaves single.** If the servant came into service unmarried, he leaves unmarried.
3. **A married man leaves with his wife.** If the servant already had a wife when he entered servanthood, the wife departs with him. Marriage, already established, remains intact.
4. If the master provided the servant a wife from among the household women, then the woman remains part of the master's household as well as any children of that union.

This seems jarring to modern ears, but in context, it reflects two realities:

1. The master had legal responsibility and ongoing provision for the woman and children.
2. The marriage was entered into **under the conditions of servanthood**, not independent of it.

Every provision here limits the duration and severity of servanthood. God is shaping a people whose justice reflects His compassion. The seventh-year release shows that Israel's social order must embody the rhythm of God's rest.

Vs 5-6 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.

These verses describe one of the most beautiful and symbolic procedures in the entire covenant law—the ceremony of the **willing, lifelong bondservant**.

The text says, *"If the slave plainly says..."* The Hebrew phrase is אָמַר אָמַר (*amor yomar*)—a doubled verb meaning *to declare openly, emphatically, unmistakably*. This is a decisive, public statement: **"I love my master, I love my wife, I love my children, 'I will not go free."**

This is not coerced loyalty; it is **voluntary devotion** rooted in love. The servant is **choosing relationship over independence**.

The master then brings the servant **“to God.”** This likely means **before the appointed judges** (Ex 22:8–9), acting as God’s representatives, or possibly near a sanctuary setting. The act takes place **in God’s presence**, confirming its covenant nature.

Next, the master brings him **to the door or the doorpost**. The doorpost symbolizes: the entrance into the household, identity and belonging, public witness and in Israel’s memory, the place where blood had recently been applied at Passover.

Then, with an **awl** the master pierces the servant’s ear. This physical mark identifies the servant as: Permanently attached to that household, permanently under that master’s protection, and a lifelong member of that covenant family.

Thus, “he shall be his slave forever”—meaning lifelong, not generational, servitude.

APPLICATION: This ceremony also reflects the believer’s heart. We were slaves to sin (Rom 6:17), redeemed by the Father, and brought into His household (Gal 4:4–7). Now, out of love, we too declare: “I love my Master and I will not go out free.”

We willingly become **servants of Christ** (Rom 1:1; Jas 1:1; 2 Pet 1:1), joyfully marked by devotion and the free will choice to serve our Lord and Savior Jesus forever!

Vs 7-8 "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."

These verses deal with a sensitive and often misunderstood issue—a father selling his daughter as an **“amah” (אִמָּה)**, usually translated **“female slave”** or **“maidservant.”** But the context makes clear that this is **not ordinary slavery**. Instead, it relates to a **marriage arrangement** within another household, especially in cases of poverty.

This was essentially an arranged marriage with a bride-price structure, not trafficking or servile oppression. The Hebrew term here is **אִמָּה (amah)**, distinct from **עֶבֶד (‘eved)** used for male servants. An *amah* in this context is: not a field laborer, not a perpetual slave, but a young woman placed in a household **with the expectation that she would be taken as a wife either by the master or the master’s son** (vv. 8–9).

Thus, her status is **closer to a betrothed wife** than a servant. This becomes unmistakably clear in (vv. 8–11).

“She shall not go out as the male slaves do.” Her release conditions differ from male servants. Male Hebrew servants served six years and then went free in the seventh (21:2). But a female servant “sold for marriage” does **not** simply leave after six years. Her situation must be resolved **as a marital covenant**, not as employment.

She is given **greater protections**, not fewer. The phrase **“designated her”** is **יָדָהָּ (ya ‘ad)** meaning *appointed, betrothed, pledged*. It clearly implies marital intent.

If, after entering the household, the man **changes his mind** and chooses not to marry her, he cannot simply discard her. He must act with integrity: ***“He shall let her be redeemed.”***

This means that she may be bought back by her family, or another Hebrew man may redeem her in a legitimate marriage arrangement.

“He shall have no right to sell her to a foreign people...” Because ***“he has broken faith with her.”***

The phrase ***“broken faith”*** is **גָּדַל (bagad)**—a term used in Scripture for marital betrayal or covenant treachery (Mal 2:14–16). This word choice reinforces that **she is being treated as a wife**, not a servant.

Selling her ***“to a foreign people”*** would be a betrayal of covenant duty, a devaluation of her dignity and a refusal to honor the original marriage arrangement. Thus, the law prevents exploitation and ensures her protection.

Vs 9 If he designates her for his son, he shall deal with her as with a daughter.

“...he shall deal with her as with a daughter.” This is one of the strongest statements of dignity toward a vulnerable person anywhere in the ancient Near East. The master is now responsible for treating her **as a daughter-in-law**, which in Israelite culture meant: full inclusion into the family, protection, provision, and honor consistent with the family’s own daughters.

The Hebrew daughter placed into another family is **never to be treated as merchandise**. She is a covenant person with covenant rights.

APPLICATION: This verse also reflects something of God’s own nature. Just as the master must treat her “as a daughter,” **God Himself adopts the vulnerable into His family:**

- “I will be a father to you” (2 Cor 6:18)
- Believers are “adopted as sons and daughters” (Eph 1:5; Rom 8:15–17)

Vs 10-11 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.

These verses conclude the legal protections for the *amah*—the young Hebrew woman who has entered a household under an arrangement intended for marriage. Next God gives **some of the strongest marital-rights legislation found anywhere in the ancient world**.

“If he takes another wife...” The text assumes a scenario in which the man (or his son, v. 9) has taken this young woman as a wife, but later introduces a **second wife** into the household.

While Scripture records polygamy, it never presents it as the creation ideal (Gen 2:24) and often portrays it as fraught with dysfunction (Genesis 29–30; 1 Samuel 1). But **when polygamy occurred in the ancient world**, women were often marginalized, neglected, or even replaced. God’s law **directly counters** this cultural pattern.

“He shall not diminish her food, her clothing, or her marital rights.” These three provisions are covenantal obligations—required by law. He must continue to provide full, adequate nourishment and ongoing conjugal relationship.

If he fails to provide these three things... God gives the woman a powerful remedy: ***“She shall go out for nothing, without payment of money.”*** This is remarkable protection!

Vs 12-13 “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.”

Here the law distinguishes between: **Premeditated murder** — intentional, planned killing (Hebrew: **צדק**, *tsadah*, “to hunt, lie in wait”) and **Unintentional homicide** — accidental killing without malice or intent.

“But God let him fall into his hand...” This phrase does **not** mean God causes the death. Rather, it reflects the Old Testament way of acknowledging God’s sovereign providence even in tragic accidents.

“...then I will appoint for you a place to which he may flee.” This introduces the principle of **asylum** for the unintentional manslayer. Before Israel entered the land, one place a man could flee was the **brazen altar**. This is implied in the very next verse.

This is seen later in practice, **Adonijah** fled to the altar (1 Kgs 1:50) and **Joab** did the same in (1 Kgs 2:28)—but because he was a murderer, Solomon ordered him executed. The altar served as a **temporary refuge**, a place where justice paused long enough to evaluate intent.

Once Israel entered the Promised Land, God established **six cities of refuge**—three on each side of the Jordan (Num 35; Josh 20). These cities served several purposes: including to protect the manslayer from the “avenger of blood” until trial, ensure justice was carried out fairly, prevent escalations of family vengeance.

Vs 14 But if a man willfully attacks another to kill him by cunning, you shall take him from my altar, that he may die.

This verse forms the **direct contrast** to the previous one. Whereas verse 13 deals with *unintentional* killing, verse 14 addresses **premeditated murder**—the deliberate, calculated taking of another person’s life.

The phrase ***“willfully attacks”*** uses the Hebrew concept of intentionality. The text emphasizes **premeditation**, described as killing ***“by cunning.”*** This paints a picture of a person who planned the attack, plotted the circumstances, and acted with malice. This kind of murder receives **the most severe penalty**: death.

Here, Yahweh explicitly forbids the altar from being used to shield a murderer: ***“You shall take him from my altar, that he may die.”*** Even if he clings to the horns of the altar, he cannot escape justice.

The altar—symbolizing atonement, forgiveness, and God’s presence—**cannot be misused as a shelter for unrepentant violence**. Laying hold of the altar could not protect the murderer.

Vs 15 “Whoever strikes his father or his mother shall be put to death.”

The verb “**strikes**” means “to smite, beat, or strike with violence.” The law envisions a **violent assault**, not a minor blow, angry gesture, or disrespectful gesture.

In Israel’s covenant structure, parents were the primary authority God placed over children (Deut 6:4–9). To attack them physically was viewed as attacking **God’s authority**. Thus, the penalty is severe: **death**. This was not for childish behavior, disrespect, or typical family conflict, but **violent, rebellious assault**.

An Important Note: Parents did not carry out judgments on their children, but instead brought them to the judges. We see this clearly in **Deuteronomy 21:18–21**, which provides the legal procedure for dealing with severely rebellious children.

Vs 16 "Whoever steals a man and sells him, and anyone found in possession of him, shall be put to death."

This law addresses **kidnapping**—specifically the kidnapping of a human being for sale or forced servitude. The severity of the penalty underscores the seriousness of the crime in God’s eyes.

The verse outlines **three connected actions**, all punishable by death: stealing a person, selling a kidnapped person, or even possessing a kidnapped person.

Every stage of the crime—capture, trafficking, and possession—is met with the same sentence: **death**.

Vs 17 "Whoever curses his father or his mother shall be put to death."

This verse forms the second half of a pair with Exodus 21:15. While verse 15 deals with **physical assault** against parents, verse 17 addresses **verbal assault**—specifically *cursing* father or mother.

Together, they reinforce the priority of the **Fifth Commandment** (Exod 20:12): “*Honor your father and your mother.*”

The verb translated “curse” is קָלַל (*qalal*), which means to make light of, to treat as insignificant, to show contempt, to dishonor publicly. It is not merely a moment of disrespect, sarcasm, or angry teenage words.

In legal context, *qalal* refers to **public, declared, sustained contempt** toward one’s parents—an assault on their dignity, authority, and standing within the covenant community.

Vs 18-19 "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."

These verses shift from capital crimes to cases of **non-fatal injury**, outlining how Israel was to handle personal conflicts that escalated into violence. This is a classic example of **casuistic law**—“IF ... THEN”—that provides judicial precedent for Israel’s elders and magistrates.

“*When men quarrel...*” The Hebrew root רִיב (*riv*) means *to dispute, contend, or argue*. The scene is not cold-blooded aggression but a fight—heated conflict that turns physical.

One man strikes another “*with a stone or with his fist.*” This is not attempted murder, because the previous verses already distinguished intentional killing (vv. 12–14) from accidental homicide (v. 13).

Here, the injured man **survives**, but is incapacitated. But if he later “**risers again and walks outdoors with his staff...**” The law concludes: “*...he who struck him shall be clear.*” He is **not guilty of attempted murder** because there was no premeditation and the victim recovered.

This is an important distinction in Biblical law: **intent matters.**

Although the attacker is “clear” of the capital offense, he is **not free of responsibility**. Two legal obligations are stated: He must pay for the loss of time. This means **lost wages**, productivity, or income. The Hebrew is literally “**his cessation**” or “**idleness**”—the period during which he cannot work. The one who causes injury must make restitution.

Vs 20-21 "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.

These verses address situations in which a master strikes a slave. The law states that if the slave dies “*under his hand,*” meaning immediately or as a direct result of the blow, **the master “shall surely be avenged,”** implying legal retribution carried out by the community.

Though the text does not explicitly specify the form of this vengeance, the vocabulary strongly echoes the principle of *lex talionis*—“**life for life**” (Exod 21:23–25).

Verse 21, introduces a conditional clause: “*But if the slave survives a day or two, he is not to be avenged, for he is his money.*” The phrase “*he is his money*” does **not** reduce the slave’s humanity; rather, it recognizes the legal-economic reality of the master’s investment.

The logic is that if the slave survives beyond the immediate incident, the court assumes that death was not clearly the result of intentional lethal force. Far from condoning brutality, this law actually served to **limit** violence, regulate power, and uphold the value of human life.

Vs 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.

This law envisions a scenario in which two men are fighting and, in the chaos of the struggle, accidentally strike a pregnant woman. The text states that the blow results in the woman’s “**children coming out**”, which refers to a premature birth or miscarriage of the child(ren).

Importantly, the verse adds, “*but there is no harm*”, meaning that neither the mother nor the child suffers injury or death. In such a case, the offender is not subject to corporal punishment but instead **must pay a**

fine. The fine is assessed by the woman's husband, but its final amount is determined and validated by the judges, ensuring that justice is proportional and not driven by personal vengeance.

This law clearly affirms the **value of the unborn child**, treating harm to the child as legally significant.

Exodus 21:22 teaches that compensation should correspond directly to the injury caused and not be inflated by anger, fear, or the desire to "teach a lesson."

Vs 23-25 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.

We continue with the above scenario. But now the focus shifts to cases where **harm** does occur—whether to the mother or to the child. The text declares, *"But if there is harm, then you shall pay life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth..."* This introduces the principle famously known as **lex talionis**, the law of proportional retribution. The point is not vengeance but **measured, judicially supervised justice** that fits the harm.

If the injury results in the death of the child or mother, the penalty is **"life for life."** This again underscores the **full value and personhood of the unborn** within the covenant legal system.

King Jesus addressed this very principle in the Sermon on the Mount (Mat 5:38-42). Jesus is not overturning the civil justice system of Israel; He is addressing **personal ethics** among His disciples.

Whereas the Mosaic law ensured fair legal justice, Jesus calls His followers to something even higher: **voluntary surrender of personal rights for the sake of the kingdom.** This is not a denial of justice but an elevation of grace. Paul echoes this same principle in 1 Corinthians 6:1–6.

Vs 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.

Unlike the earlier laws (vv. 20–21), which deal with death or survival after a beating, this verse focuses on **permanent bodily injury**—in this case, the destruction of the eye.

What is remarkable is how the **lex talionis principle is applied differently** in this situation. For freemen, the pattern was literal or judicially equivalent proportionality: *"eye for eye, tooth for tooth"* (vv. 23–25).

But for a slave, the law substitutes something far more valuable and transformative: **freedom.** The slave does not cause the loss of the master's eye in return—rather, the slave **gains liberty**, a far greater compensation than mere physical equivalence.

By granting freedom, the law recognizes both the seriousness of the injury and the inherent dignity of the slave. More importantly, it places a **powerful check on abuse**: any deliberate or negligent action that causes permanent injury results in the permanent loss of the master's claim on the slave.

Vs 27 If he knocks out the tooth of his slave, male or female, he shall let the slave go free because of his tooth.

Verse 27 presents a companion case to the previous law. The ruling is simple but profound: **the slave is immediately granted freedom**. This demonstrates, once again, that the principle of *lex talionis* is reshaped in Israel's slave laws.

Vs 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.

This scenario concerns an ox acting without prior history of aggression—an unexpected, unintentional tragedy. The legal response consists of three key components, the ox is to be stoned, the flesh is not to be eaten, the owner is not held liable. This verse displays the careful precision of God's covenant legislation

Vs 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.

The text outlines three critical conditions the ox has a pattern of aggression, the owner has been warned, the owner has failed to restrain the animal. If all three conditions are met and the ox kills someone, the law prescribes two penalties; the ox is to be stoned and the owner shall be put to death.

This is a **legal recognition of culpable negligence**. The owner is not guilty of murder, but of **manslaughter through reckless disregard** for human life. The death penalty here demonstrates how seriously God's law views responsibility when it is known

Theologically, Exodus 21:29 highlights a profound moral truth: **to know of danger and refuse to act is to share in the guilt of the outcome**.

Vs 30 If a ransom is imposed on him, then he shall give for the redemption of his life whatever is imposed on him.

After stating in v. 29 that the negligent owner is **liable to death**, this verse clarifies that in cases of negligent homicide, **the death penalty is not mandatory**. Instead, the family of the deceased may choose to accept a ransom in place of the owner's execution. The amount was not arbitrary; it was determined **"whatever is imposed on him,"** indicating that the surviving relatives, with the judges' approval, set the terms.

While the law upholds the sanctity of human life by deeming the negligent owner worthy of death, it simultaneously allows space for compassion.

Vs 31 If it gores a man's son or daughter, he shall be dealt with according to this same rule.

This brief statement eliminates any possibility that different standards of justice might apply based on the age, social status, or perceived value of the victim. Whether the ox kills an adult or a child, the legal

requirements remain identical. This is rooted in the doctrine of the **imago Dei** (Gen 1:26–27): every human being, regardless of age or social power, bears the image of God and is therefore protected by divine justice.

Vs 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.

Unlike the case of a free person (vv. 28–31), where negligence may incur the death penalty or ransom, the compensation for the death of a slave is set at a **fixed legal value: thirty shekels of silver**. This amount was not arbitrary; it represented the **legal slave price** in ancient Israel.

The ox must still be stoned. This parallels the earlier cases (vv. 28–29). Even though the compensation differs, the theological principle remains the same: **human life—any human life—is sacred**.

CONSIDER: (Zech 11:12–13 and Mat 26:14–16).

Vs 33–34 "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.

The scenario envisions a man digging a pit—most likely a cistern for water storage. If he neglects to cover it and a neighbor's ox or donkey falls in and dies, **the one who dug the pit is liable** and must make restitution.

He is required to compensate the animal's owner with **full monetary reimbursement**. After paying restitution, the man who dug the pit receives the carcass. This creates a balance: the injured party is fully compensated, yet the negligent party receives whatever residual value remains.

Vs 35–36 "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."

This case assumes that the ox that caused the damage did not have a history of goring and it was unforeseeable. In such a situation, the law prescribes a remarkably balanced solution: **sell the surviving ox** and divide the money equally and **divide the carcass** of the dead ox equally.

This prevents one party from bearing a disproportionate financial loss. Neither owner gains or loses unduly. Justice is maintained through **equitable sharing**. If, on the other hand, the ox was known to have gored before, the owner was warned, and still failed to restrain, then the rules change.

Under these conditions: The owner must provide the other man a **full replacement animal**.

These laws reveal profound truths about the character and expectations of God:

1. God's justice is sensitive to intent.
2. God values fairness and communal harmony.
3. God holds His people responsible for preventable harm.
4. Everyday life is part of covenant faithfulness.