God's Goodness in God's Directives
Exodus 21:1-22:15

Covering all that is here in a half-hour is not remotely feasible. An attempt at such would fail in the prudent department in a number of ways, not the least whatever is crackling in your crockpot back home being burned to an inedible crisp! Beyond such sympathetic and aromatic considerations, what God gave to Moses here did not cover every possible situation that could arise in the wilderness or in Israel's future home beyond the Jordan. Yet, being God's Word, the Book of the Covenant—from near the end of Exodus 20 through Exodus 23—offered needed instruction for them. Understood in its proper place and through the right theological grid, it can likewise edify us as citizens of Christ's kingdom.

But an important detail throughout Exodus is the distinction between the Ten Commandments and the "case laws" that follow them. The Ten Words were spoken by God Himself and, in time, written by His finger and placed inside the ark of the covenant, giving them a unique prominence in the Mosaic system. These newer instructions, however, were mediated through Moses and later written down by him.[1] They do not, like the Ten, bind with "the same eternal force," but should be viewed as applications flowing from the Ten Commandments.[2] They gave Israel guiding principles for living well, peaceably, and godly in community—directions for handling various civil cases and for knowing what to do *just in case* certain things transpired among them. The specific demands and penalties attached to these laws belonged to Israel as a nation.

To echo Kevin DeYoung and to repeat myself from a few weeks back, the Ten Commandments function somewhat like the Constitution of the United States, while the civil and ceremonial laws are like the statutes and regulations that reinforce that Constitution. The Ten Commandments are the "parent" laws, and these civil laws from chapters 21–23 are their offspring in application form.[3] Therefore, they no longer function precisely as they did in Israel; we do not see Jesus or the New Testament authors simply carrying them over wholesale as uniquely binding upon the New Testament church or any government body. Instead, we read them in light of Jesus' teaching, His redemptive work, and the Holy Spirit implanted within all who believe in Him. And through such lenses, we see something worthy of our attention: As Jesus did in the Gospels, here is an extraordinary LORD stooping to help Israel in the ordinariness of life. This text addresses employment issues, family relations, and animal mishaps. Does it get any more normal than that? The LORD deeply cares about the worship of His people, as we will see in the chapters ahead; but He also cares profoundly about life in the weeds. All of life belongs under the lordship of Christ. Nothing is to be left undevoted to Him.

I. The Necessity and Functionality of Servitude (21:1-11)

God offers a reassuring word to a fearful Israel before He instructs them on how to take the ten commandments all the way down into their daily grind. He expresses at the end of chapter 20, "***I will make an altar…with offerings…I will come to you and bless you…"*** Again, God's exuding mercy undergirds expected obedience. Sacrifice with respect to Israel's sin takes place before compliance with respect to Israel's holiness.

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[1] Exodus 24:4, "*And Moses wrote down all the words of the LORD*."
[2] Philip Ryken, *Exodus*, 698.
[3] Kevin DeYoung, *The 10 Commandments*, 18.

And God begins the Book of the Covenant in a way which makes complete sense—this relationship between ***slave*** and ***master***. For four centuries Israel experienced oppression, abuse, and cruelty while enslaven to Egypt and her tyrants. And now, delivered and freed from all such harshness, Israel needed different and clear direction from the LORD on how the slave/master relationship was to function in a way that honored Him and maintained the dignity of each other.

And notice God's goodness and provision from the start. The Israelites came into this kind of service mostly out of necessity. How else might poorer people, in the context of having no larger regulatory organizations for the relief of the poor, find gainful employment to eat and clothe themselves? The average worker knew nothing of larger establishments like Amazon and all the securities we know exist inside of a megacorporation. In the ancient world, most jobs came by way of landowners or venders who made contractual agreements with individuals and even families, which is what we pick up on here in verses 1-11.

So, one way the relationship was distinct from what happened in Egypt was that the vast majority of service in Israel was voluntary, not forced. This was not the enslavement a few decades removed from our own world where people were stolen from homelands and snatched away from families for the sole benefit of the thief with his God-forsaken ambitions. We shouldn't stumble over the terms here by painting our view of antebellum slavery in America over the canvas of Exodus 21. These servants would often live in their master's home where they worked in exchange for a living space and an honest wage.[4] This was the way out of abject poverty, and as such it could be considered a kind provision of Yahweh. Just like your vocation, or mine.

There is definite latitude of understanding in the language of these kinds of relationships here in Exodus. ***Slave*** can signify a worker, employee, or a servant. ***Master*** can connote boss, employer, or owner.[5] We express this kind of latitude even in our day. You wouldn't look funny at me if I said something about the "owner" of the Memphis Grizzlies, right? In what sense does Robert Pera "own" that team and its players? He doesn't own them in the worst sense of that word, telling them what they must do every hour, punishing them at his whims, or have absolute reins over every part of their lives. No, by laying down a large sum to purchase the organization, he became the team's owner charged with the individuals' various employment details spelled out contractually, but that's it. Of course, the relationship could function in wicked ways—see the first few chapters of Exodus, or the rotten version of slavery that took place in our own country for centuries. But this here, in Exodus 21, is not that there! Under the banner of God's goodness, this service was temporary, voluntary, and necessary.

That's the distinction, but what of its foundation? What lies underneath the nature of this master/servant relationship? The decalogue. In fact, all 40-plus case laws have Ten Commandment beams holding them up in some way, sometimes more than one in a given situation. In verses 1-11 the 8th commandment is in play. The older term as it regards enslavement of the wrong kind was "man-stealing." The positive side of the 7th commandment comes into view as well. The honoring of the marriage covenant is on exhibition in verses 3 and 10. So, God is wisely setting the right terms and trajectories for Israel in the servant/master relationship.

[4] Ryken, 699.
[5] Douglas Stuart, *NAC: Exodus*, 474.

To frame it in the larger category, how should neighbor-love play out in Israel? By masters honoring the "contract" to free their servants after ***six years***. What an incredible pattern and reminder of God's redeeming hand rescuing the whole nation! It was a statute meant to reiterate that they belong to the Yahweh. Above all else, He is to have their devoted hearts and hands. So no, you don't own each other, and shouldn't operate like you do. When we turn into the New Testament, we see that we don't even own ourselves. "*You are not your own, for you were bought with a price.*"[6] How else might Israel love well their neighbor? Again, by honoring the marriage covenant seen in verses 3-5. (One wonders if Paul was informed by a text like this when he wrote in Hebrews 13, "*Let marriage be held in honor among all*"). Neighbor love, how else? By protecting the well-being of women who might get placed in a situation of helplessness, which we see in verse 7-11.

The overall thrust of this section is that God is creating "a net" which protects the vulnerable and weak against human hardness and sinfulness.[7] That being said, abuses would occur. Service and leadership inside the context of selfishness rarely turn out for good. But God gave directives because God is good and He was drawing boundaries for His people's peace and provision.

II. The Value of Life and Honor (21:12-36)

The LORD proceeds by making application of the sixth command, "*You shall not murder*." Again, God's goodness for the community bleeds through these laws directed when harm is done, whether intentionally or unintentionally. Notice here how the LORD was protecting the community from murderers while simultaneously protecting those who accidentally took a life. Verses 12-13, ***"He who strikes a man so that he dies shall surely 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 you a place to which he may flee.*** By contrast, the peoples immediately surrounding Israel—all the various -ites, Hittites, Amorites, Jebusites, etc.—it was more common for those nations to make no distinction between *purposeful* and *accidental* homicide.[8] Thus, vengeance killings became normalized, and continues to have a presence in the social fabric of many parts of modern-day cultures.[9] But God does draw lines, even promising places of refuge for those involved in accidental death cases.[10]

Other relational ills, which would surely arise as Israel as they moved through the wilderness on the way to the land of promise, are attached to the fifth command—the honoring of father and mother. How might we understand this capital offense, a deserving-of-death-dishonor reflected in verse 17, ***"He who curses his father or his mother shall surely be put to death."?***

When we read Proverbs, we learn of wise perspectives and practices concerning children and discipline. Fundamentally, to discipline children is right and good. But then we read from Solomon some ways that should be done—through teaching, verbal corrections and rebukes, warnings, and appropriate physical correction. So obviously not every time a parent in Israel was dishonored

[6] 1 Corinthians 6:19-20
[7] https://www.9marks.org/episode/exodus-21-on-slavery-proportional-justice-goring-oxen-and-other-easy-topics-bible-talk-ep-29/
[8] Stuart, 485.
[9] Somalia and Papau New Guinea to name two. https://www.euaa.europa.eu/coi/somalia/2025/country-focus/15-individuals-involved-blood-feudsclan-disputes-and-other-clan-issues/151-mapping-major-clan-conflictsfeuds?utm_source=chatgpt.com & https://papuanewguinea.un.org/en/260983-united-nations-papua-new-guinea-strongly-condemns-mass-killing-over-53-people-enga-province-?utm_source=chatgpt.com
[10] Numbers 35:9-34, Deuteronomy 4:41-43, Joshua 20:1-9

would verse 17 apply, otherwise they would have been a childless nation! But the LORD is referring to much more serious acts, probably from mostly older children who have repudiated or denounced their parents in some way.[11] Not a flash of frustration bound up by a sinful word or moment per se, but a strategic, elongated censuring of them with disrespect and disdain.

Why so serious? Because, as the law is always conveying, God is holy. And how any of us relates to authority figures in life is an ultimate reflection of how we relate to God Himself. We can't ever forget God as Creator and Judge of all the earth has the right to give life and take it, and He always does what is right in His judgments. Maybe a point of perspective is how much patience God habitually exercised in the life of one who dishonored parents *before* the ordaining of this penultimate, deadly outcome. How many opportunities for repentance and obedience before He acts decisively against the law-breaker? Remember who this God is. *Merciful and gracious*, not quick triggered to judgment, but quick triggered with mercy. He is not devoid of anger, but He is *slow to anger*.

This holy seriousness grounded in His goodness is carried through the remainder of chapter 21. Running from verse 12 to 27, at root we have some case laws about fighting and quarreling with each other which involve varying manifestations of anger. The situations of striking someone else with a stone, striking a slave, and striking a pregnant woman are brought to the surface. No doubt that in the camp there were domestic volcanic eruptions of anger—the hot-heads who wore it all on their proverbial sleeves. And there were iceberg versions of the same—the cold and careless, frustrated with everything in life, the say-nothings who just want to right every wrong done to them or others by getting even somehow. And God is instructing Israel how to judiciously deal with those who have gone too far in their anger.[12] We see evil, or experience it, and oftentimes mismanaged anger is our own response. The anger is right, but very often it "*does not produce the righteousness of God*."[13]

Whatever led to the ***strikings*** found in verses 12 through 26, they wouldn't be motivated by pure and holy intentions. In fact, they pictured anger being sowed, growing harmful, and reaping penalties befitting of the crimes, verses 23-24, ***life for a life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth***. These were directions needed for the immediate. We can imagine the wilderness presenting a set of challenges which fostered aggravation with each other. Heat, thirst, and hunger? I'm sure you're at your best under these circumstances, right? No, what these realities do is they often bring out what's in the heart. Israel needed direction for the immediate and for the long haul as well. How could they ever magnify the name of God to the nations if they lived contrary to His instructions? It didn't work like that in the Mosaic Covenant, nor does it in the New Covenant.[14] God taught His people to value life and honor in the community. Emotional hate and physical harm are antithetical to true holiness.

III. The Stewardship of Property and Relationships (22:1-15)

In some ways I was reminded of the book of Ecclesiastes when I read this section. Not so much the theft mentioned in 22:1-5, but in all the plausible situations the LORD uses to teach His people,

[11] Stuart, 489.
[12] David Powlison, *Good & Angry*, 11-12.
[13] James 1:20
[14] In the context of living inside the righteousness which exceeds the Pharisees, Jesus words in Matthew 5:16 ring out.

many of them seem to be on the level of simple happenstances, like the man injured by the very log he'd split, or the uncertainty of where a tree falls.[15] Here, we have a bull meandering into ***another man's field***, ***a fire breaking out***, and the unexpected death of a neighbor's ***donkey*** that you were tasked to care for while he and his wife were vacating on the Mediterranean Sea. How are things made right in these situations? Yahweh supplies wise ways the think about these things and to help Israel think clearly about restitution for incurred losses. All the animals in this section have much to do with people's livelihoods. They aren't unimportant and have great bearing on what makes it to the supper table and what hovers over them to keep them from the elements. Again, God is caring for the nation by directing them to what is most loving in situation after situation.

This unchanging posture of care by Yahweh can be seen clearly when His Son walked among us. We discover the extraordinary Christ entering the ordinariness of human existence. Wolves, sheep, sparrows, fish, serpents, camels, pigs, moths, and roosters; a child asking for fish, a landowner collecting produce, a midnight knock at the door, a widow giving all she had. Jesus wields the common through His teaching to produce what is uncommon in our world—a people who reflect His image. These case laws are flowing out of the same heart we've discovered in our Savior.

I was struck this week with how John's Gospel ends, "*Now there are also many other things that Jesus did. Were every one of them to be written, I suppose that the world itself could not contain the books that would be written*." We can't fathom all the possible ways in 33 years that our LORD Jesus perfectly expressed love for His Father and His neighbor. Yet, part of the story of His life is reflected even here, in these civil laws. We're not to simply appropriate the teachings of these laws unfolding in their context. No, they unveil things about our Jesus Christ! In Him, we eye the best contours of both servant and master. He came not to be served, but to serve and to give His life a ransom for many.[16] While simultaneously being LORD of all—raising the dead, calming the tumults, commanding the demonic powers.[17] Being Life itself, Jesus modeled how to value life and esteem what was most worthy of honor. He honored humility rather than prominence; generosity rather than wealth; spiritual perception rather than physical pedigree.[18] And if anyone ever stewarded well what He possessed and who He came into contact with, the pages of the New Testament unfold such a God-man.

Conclusion

Therefore, have fresh courage and rejoice dear believer that we move out from Christ's impeccable righteousness being our eternal standing into living righteously before God and each other. There is no holy living unless the penalty for our sin has been dealt the death blow through Jesus' redeeming work at the cross. Are you trusting Christ who canceled the record of debt that stood against you through your sin and rebellion? The Scriptures says that what Jesus did on the cross paid for such crippling debt.[19]

[15] Ecclesiastes 10:9, 11:3
[16] Mark 10:45
[17] Mark 5; Matthew 8:26; Luke 4:35
[18] Matthew 18:1-4; Luke 21:1-4; Matthew 11:25-27
[19] Colossians 2:13-14

From that status alone, then, can we enter the process of being transformed. And there is no place intended to be hidden from His purifying work in His people. I'm convinced that this is what's behind these case laws. If Christ is LORD, then is there any practice, aim, affection that can be distanced from His rule?

Too many times what's going on inside of us is this: "Lord, I love You and I'll give you many lanes of my life, but You have Your lanes and I have mine. Father, please, I ask You humbly, stay in Your lane and help me in mine." Would we say this aloud, ever? Doubtful. But it's how we can too easily function. Brothers and sisters, Jesus demands it all. He merits entrance into all of life.[20] For from Him and through Him and to Him are all things.[21] Let that be our motto and the great pursuit of our lives.

[20] Alec Motyer, *The Message of Exodus*, 243.
[21] Romans 11:36