

EXODUS—WEEK 15

CONSTRAINING SIN



F. Michael Slay
A DEEP Study

The Fellowship of Ailbe

*The Cover Picture is Moses at Mount Sinai by Jacques de Létin (1597–1661)
on display at Musée des beaux-arts in Troyes, France*

This section gets into the details of some tough subjects—murder, slavery, and buying wives. By modern standards, the rules set forth are insufficient.

But they are an incredible leap forward for their time.

We're pleased to provide *the DEEP* studies in PDF format at no charge. We hope you will find them helpful and encouraging as you press on in your journey toward spiritual maturity in the Lord.

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Thank you.

Exodus 20:18–21:21 — Constraining Sin
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1 Exodus 20:18–26

Now all the people witnessed the thunderings, the lightning flashes, the sound of the trumpet, and the mountain smoking; and when the people saw it, they trembled and stood afar off. Then they said to Moses, “You speak with us, and we will hear; but let not God speak with us, lest we die.”

And Moses said to the people, “Do not fear; for God has come to test you, and that His fear may be before you, so that you may not sin.” So the people stood afar off, but Moses drew near the thick darkness where God was.

Then the LORD said to Moses, “Thus you shall say to the children of Israel: ‘You have seen that I have talked with you from heaven. You shall not make anything to be with Me—gods of silver or gods of gold you shall not make for yourselves. An altar of earth you shall make for Me, and you shall sacrifice on it your burnt offerings and your peace offerings, your sheep and your oxen. In every place where I record My name I will come to you, and I will bless you. And if you make Me an altar of stone, you shall not build it of hewn stone; for if you use your tool on it, you have profaned it. Nor shall you go up by steps to My altar, that your nakedness may not be exposed on it.’

The clamor on the mountain is too much for the Israelites, and they keep their distance. Good, they’re supposed to stay back anyway. Moses explains that this is just God’s way of intimidating them to keep them from sinning and not something to be feared generally. (That is, God isn’t unpredictably dangerous).

Then God reiterates the commandment against making idols but extends it a bit. They’re not only prohibited from fashioning idols; when they build an altar of stones, they’re prohibited from even fashioning the stones. The altar should be made of stones that are just as God made them; fashioning them profanes them.

Altars had to be all natural.

God loves His creation. That’s obvious, but we gloss over it. We make a lot of noise about how God loves us (and, to be sure, God’s love for us is special), but we rarely take the time to appreciate God’s love for His whole creation.

*The heavens declare the glory of God;
the skies proclaim the work of his hands.
Day after day they pour forth speech;
night after night they reveal knowledge. — Psalm 19:1–2 (NIV)*

Praise God for the beauty and wonder of His creation. Here’s an incredibly beautiful image from the Webb telescope. It’s real—no manipulation at all. It’s the result of two galaxies colliding.

<https://www.flickr.com/photos/nasawebbtelescope/53852202289/in/album-72177720313923911>

Don’t worship the creation; worship Him. But marveling at the wonders He has wrought counts.

2 Exodus 21:1–6

“Now these are the judgments which you shall set before them: If you buy a Hebrew servant, he shall serve six years; and in the seventh he shall go out free and pay nothing. If he comes in by himself, he shall go out by himself; if he comes in married, then his wife shall go out with him. If his master has given him a wife, and she has borne him sons or daughters, the wife and her children shall be her master’s, and he shall go out by himself. But if the servant plainly says, ‘I love my master, my wife, and my children; I will not go out free,’ then his master shall bring him to the judges. He shall also bring him to the door, or to the doorpost, and his master shall pierce his ear with an awl; and he shall serve him forever.”

The chilling history of slavery in America makes these verses difficult for us to read. But, in fact, they shouldn’t be troubling. The servitude called “slavery” here is not analogous to American slavery; it’s analogous to “indentured servitude.”

Indentured servants were common in colonial America. People sold themselves into indentured servitude to pay a debt or to pay for passage to America. But indentured servitude wasn’t permanent. That made all the difference. Indentured servitude was a form of paid up front employment. Conversely, American slavery was an inhumane system in which people actually bought and sold other people.

However, biblical slavery could be made permanent.

But if the servant plainly says, ‘I love my master, my wife, and my children; I will not go out free,’ then his master shall bring him to the judges. He shall also bring him to the door, or to the doorpost, and his master shall pierce his ear with an awl; and he shall serve him forever.

We don’t know much about how this permanent slavery worked. Obviously, if it was anything like American slavery, no one would ever want to do this. We know from Genesis 42:6 that back then even a foreign slave in the Egyptian system could rise to become second in command over the whole nation. American slaves had nothing close to that kind of opportunity.

This passage doesn’t abolish slavery, but it does add some useful regulations. These regulations protected slaves and gave them specific rights.

It’s hard to imagine that slavery still exists, but it does. And modern slavery (AKA human trafficking) is just as vicious as antebellum American slavery—maybe more so. A lot of it is sex slavery.

This isn’t just going on around the world; it’s going on right under our noses. The US Department of Homeland Security (DHS) has a hotline to report suspected trafficking (888) 373-7888.

<https://humantraffickinghotline.org/>

<https://www.dhs.gov/blue-campaign/what-human-trafficking>

Do everything you can do to end this incredible evil. Pray, and keep your eyes open.

3 Exodus 21:7–11

“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 has 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. 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.”

These verses equate female slavery with marriage. You could buy a bride from her father. That sounds pretty extreme until we remember that Isaac and Jacob essentially bought their brides, and these turned out to be legitimate, successful marriages.

“Here is Rebekah before you; take her and go, and let her be your master’s son’s wife, as the LORD has spoken.” And it came to pass, when Abraham’s servant heard their words, that he worshiped the LORD, bowing himself to the earth. Then the servant brought out jewelry of silver, jewelry of gold, and clothing, and gave them to Rebekah. He also gave precious things to her brother and to her mother. — Genesis 24:51–53

*Now Jacob loved Rachel; so he said, “I will serve you seven years for Rachel your younger daughter.” And Laban said, “It is better that I give her to you than that I should give her to another man. Stay with me.” — Genesis 29:18–19*hmjbmhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh

This is all in the context of a primitive culture with many primitive practices. Often, rather than abolish those practices, the Bible regulated them so as to protect the innocent.

The regulations imposed here were a leap forward in women’s rights.

Think modern courtship is better? Consider this article showing that in sixty percent of reported on-campus rapes, the accuser was too drunk to remember what happened.

<http://online.wsj.com/news/articles/SB10001424052702304558804579374844067975558?mg=reno64-wsj&url=http%3A%2F%2Fonline.wsj.com%2Farticle%2FSB10001424052702304558804579374844067975558.html>

How can laws protect people who don’t care to protect themselves? You can’t legislate self-esteem.

The mistreatment of women is just one facet of man’s inhumanity to man. We don’t need new laws to get people to *act* sane; we need them to *become* sane. Only gospel transformation can do that.

God has placed His church in the middle of an ocean of pain. We need to respect the magnitude of the situation and act accordingly.

God saved us for things like this.

4 Exodus 21:12–17

“He who strikes a man so that he dies shall surely be put to death. However, if he did not lie in wait, but God delivered him into his hand, then I will appoint for you a place where he may flee.

“But if a man acts with premeditation against his neighbor, to kill him by treachery, you shall take him from My altar, that he may die.

“And he who strikes his father or his mother shall surely be put to death.

“He who kidnaps a man and sells him, or if he is found in his hand, shall surely be put to death.

“And he who curses his father or his mother shall surely be put to death.”

These verses introduce capital punishment. Capital crimes include first-degree murder (but, notably, not second-degree murder), shanghaiing someone into slavery, possessing such a shanghaied slave, and egregious violations of the fifth commandment to honor thy father and mother.

Murder comes first, not surprisingly. However, there are a lot of details and special cases to consider. The distinction between first and second-degree murder is important. All this, including how each case should be handled, is detailed in Numbers 35.

At first glance, capital punishment for merely possessing a shanghaied slave seems excessive. However, unlike any other stolen property, slaves can testify to the fact that they were stolen. So, no one can claim ignorance about where a slave came from. This law destroys the market for shanghaied slaves.

The punishment for grossly dishonoring one’s parents seems incredibly severe. Okay, so don’t do that; it’s not all that difficult. Apparently, this is very important to God. He makes the rules, right?

Besides, a strong family structure is essential to society, and honoring parents is key to that.

If you’re looking for an explanation for why our society is going down the tubes, look no further than the collapse of traditional families. Nothing correlates more with success than coming from a stable family. Nothing correlates more with crime than coming from a broken one.

But why are families breaking up so often nowadays? It’s the church’s job to help, but how?

The answer is not to treat the symptoms but to treat the disease. Divorce and out-of-wedlock births are not the root cause. Sin is. The answer is the gospel. You save marriages by saving people.

I know this sounds like I’m saying that the gospel is the answer to everything.

That’s because the gospel is the answer to everything.

5 Exodus 21:18–21

“If men contend with each other, and one strikes the other with a stone or with his fist, and he does not die but is confined to his bed, if he rises again and walks about outside with his staff, then he who struck him shall be acquitted. He shall only pay for the loss of his time, and shall provide for him to be thoroughly healed.

“And if a man beats his male or female servant with a rod, so that he dies under his hand, he shall surely be punished. Notwithstanding, if he remains alive a day or two, he shall not be punished; for he is his property.”

People are troubled by this passage because they think it condones slavery. It doesn't condone slavery any more than it condones fighting. Yes, the only kind of slavery the Bible totally bans is shanghaied slaves, but it imposes important restrictions on all other kinds.

The words here, in context, imply that this rule doesn't refer to the indentured servant kind of slave. Still, it allows things we wouldn't tolerate today.

But that's just the point. This was written long ago when these practices were not only common but unregulated. These laws break the ice on the concept that there will be permanent rules on what you can and cannot do to a slave. Slave owners back then would have thought, “Baloney! I can do anything I want with my own property.”

Not with property that's created in the image of God.

The same concept applies to fighting. The rule is no longer the winner wins and the loser just loses. If you put someone in the “hospital,” you have to pay his “medical bills” and also compensate him for his loss of time. Again, some people would have surely reacted with something like, “Baloney!”

Nope. Human life is precious.

Slavery is still surprisingly widespread.

<https://www.antislavery.org/slavery-today/modern-slavery/>

They cried out with a loud voice, “O Sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long before you will judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth?” — Revelation 6:10

This illustrates a horrible truth about man's sinful nature—people will do anything for money. Nothing is too evil.

The only way to stop something is to take away the profit. This applies to elephant poaching the same as to human slavery. The only way to stop it is to eliminate the market.

That's what to pray for. That's what to work for.

Questions for reflection or discussion

1. Where do you see God in nature?
2. Have you ever seen something first-hand that made you suspect human trafficking?
3. Have you ever gotten directly involved in someone else's crisis?
4. How do you present the gospel to a couple that's at loggerheads? (How is the presentation different?)
5. Have you ever watched someone become corrupted by money?