



## **EXODUS 21-22 GOD'S LAWS – PENAL AND ECONOMIC CODES**

We are covering a very important part of Scripture: God's wonderful laws but adapted to a carnal, Israelite society and given for our wellbeing as concrete expressions of what is true, out-flowing love. Nothing was wrong with these marvelous laws, but it was Israel's carnality that ultimately made them fail. Paul says, "For what the law could not do in that it was weak *through the flesh*... Because *the carnal mind* is enmity against God; for it is *not* subject to the law of God, nor indeed can be" (Rom. 8:3). Unfortunately, professing Christianity as a whole, instead of blaming the flesh, attack God's laws for Israel's failure to be faithful and so disregard much of them.

In this section of laws, we will be drawing heavily from the book, *Digest of the Divine Law* by Howard Rand. He mentions, "Confusion is the only word which explains the condition existing in the minds of so many Christians regarding the law through the failure to recognize the ordinances as *that law which was added*. The *ritual* does not now have to be observed; but the *Commandments, Statutes, and Judgments* are still in operation and every man and nation will ultimately be compelled to observe and keep them...Ezekiel prophesies of that time and says, 'They shall also walk in my judgments, and observe my statutes, and do them (Ez. 37:24)" (p. 10).

We are going to carefully examine the spiritual principles behind these marvelous laws, based on the Ten Commandments. God expects us to understand them. Of course, we can't fully apply them to our civil society today since God's kingdom has not arrived, but in the meantime, we can apply the spiritual principles behind these laws in our personal lives.

### **Laws respecting the 8<sup>th</sup> Commandment**

One of the things most abused in that society was human labor, by the humiliating slave system that reduced a human to a life sentence of toil. So the first thing God establishes in Israel is *humane* labor laws, where even the weakest among them (the servants) would not be abused or exploited. These laws fall under the Eighth Commandment, which prohibits someone stealing what is the other's just recompense for work.

So there were to be no slaves among the Israelites--just indentured servants—with a contract limited to six years of work, and then they were to be released in the seventh year. Also, when freed, they were not to be dismissed penniless. Deut. 15:12-14 says, "If your brother, a Hebrew man, or a Hebrew woman, is sold to you and serves you six years, then in the seventh year you shall let him go free from you. And when you send

him away free from you, you shall not let him go away empty-handed; you shall supply him liberally from your flock, from your threshing floor, and from your winepress. From what the Lord has blessed you with, you shall give to him. 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 thing today." God will always remind them of having rescued them from the cruel slavery in Egypt, and so they should be grateful and considerate toward others, and not take advantage of them. It's the principle, "Therefore, whatever you want men to do to you, do also to them, for this is the Law and the Prophets" (Mt. 7:12).

### **The penal code—crimes worthy of death penalty**

Next comes the practical application of God's Sixth Commandment, "Thou shall not kill," to civil law. God mentions four crimes that deserved the death penalty.

The first was *premeditated murder*: "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" (Ex. 21:12-14).

This law is still applied quite often today to these crimes. Notice every person was presumed innocent until proven guilty by the judges, who had to determine if the death was premeditated or accidental. In the case of an accidental death, the person was not put in jail, like they do today, but could flee to one of the cities of refuge, which was a much more humane and productive way of dealing with this situation.

The next law might appear harsh, but actually, when we see the reason, it isn't. "And he who strikes his father or his mother shall surely be put to death" (21:15). God considers the first step of doing violence to others begins with the child not honoring his parents, and beating them up. What can be expected of him later, when he grows up and enters society? He is a sure candidate for becoming a juvenile delinquent, and of causing great damage to the rest of society. So God says this scourge must be eliminated quickly so others inclined to that way will know they are facing a speedy death sentence. "Instead of having a land filled with violence and crime," says the *Digest of the Divine Law*, "we would, under the operation of the Divine laws, have a land where men, their property and their rights would be respected; while the criminally inclined would soon be removed forever from society" (p. 142).

The third crime that warranted a death penalty was for *kidnapping*. "He who kidnaps a man and sells him

[for a ransom] or if he is found in his hand, shall surely be put to death” (21:16). Kidnapping is still one of the most heinous crimes possible, and many still remember the kidnapping and murder of Charles Lindberg’s baby as one of the greatest shocks in American society.

The fourth crime that deserved the death penalty was *cursing* your parents. “And he who curses his father or his mother shall surely be put to death” (22:17). Again, God considered the respect for father and mother, embedded in the Fifth Commandment, as the basis for a healthy society, and whoever started cursing his parents was on his way to becoming a juvenile delinquent. How many crimes would the U.S. have saved, and innocent lives, if this was a commandment to be respected today by nipping the problem in the bud!

### **Crimes resulting in physical injury**

Next come certain crimes that were not severe enough to merit the death penalty, but still were under the principle of the Sixth Commandment.

“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” (21:18-19). Here again we have a law that is quite modern and still applied today. An injured person in a brawl was to be compensated for his loss of work time while convalescing and for his medical expenses.

Also, servants were not to be treated cruelly by their masters, although they were considered part of his property. If the master punished the servant and he died, the master was to be severely punished—even with death if premeditation had been found. A person’s life, no matter how humble, was sacred to God.

Next comes a violent crime toward an unborn baby. This is still a controversial issue today, but in God’s Word, the unborn baby is already a person with rights. “If men fight, and hurt a woman with child, so that she gives birth prematurely, yet no harm follows [to the baby], he shall surely be punished accordingly as the woman’s husband imposes on him; and he shall pay as the judges determine. But if any harm follows, then you shall give life for life [impose the death penalty]” (21:22-23). *The Bible Knowledge Commentary* says, “The unborn fetus is viewed in this passage as just as much a human being as its mother, the abortion of a fetus was considered murder.” This brings up the commandment about “an eye for an eye” that is often misinterpreted. God says, “But if any harm follows, then you shall give life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, burn for burn, wound for wound, stripe for stripe. If a man strikes the eye of his male or female servant, and destroys it, he shall let him

go free for the sake of the eye. And if he knocks out the tooth of his male or female servant, he shall let him go free for the sake of his tooth” (21:23-27). Here we see the principle that the punishment should fit the crime, and actually, this law was designed to avoid excessive punishment. “This is a rule governing the administration of justice,” adds *Digest of the Divine Law*, “demanding that the punishment fit the crime and that there be no excessive punishment in any case. If a hungry man steals a loaf of bread, he should not be punished as would be the thief who robs his neighbor of his goods” (p. 143).

So a person could not be penalized for knocking out a tooth and then having to pay the equivalent of *an eye*. Judges again had to determine the intention and the damages in order to reach a proper compensation.

In the case of a servant, the punishment for causing him to lose an eye or a tooth would be giving him freedom. This would ensure the proper treatment of a servant, for a serious injury would incur a great economic loss to the employer. Today, the system of worker’s compensation is based on the same principle.

Yet Jesus pointed out this is not the way an individual Christian with God’s Spirit in them should behave. Instead of demanding a punishment of equal degree to the other who caused the loss, they were to be patient, merciful, and walk the extra mile to show them an example of true and unmerited love that requires less of them. So they were to show mercy and love to them, even to their enemies (Mt. 5:38-48; Lk. 6:36).

### **Penal laws for neglect that leads to an injury**

Now the Sixth Commandment is applied to cases where injury was produced by culpable neglect. For instance, if a bull gored someone to death, the animal was to be killed. But if the animal had a habit of violently attacking people and the owner did nothing to prevent it and someone was killed, the owner as well as the bull was to be put to death, unless he could come up with financial compensation demanded by the dead person’s relatives.

“Under the principle of law involved in this decision,” adds *Digest of the Divine Law*, “modern industry would be compelled to place every possible safeguard around machinery and eliminate bad working conditions dangerous to life. If failure to do so resulted in death, then the individuals responsible for such failure would forfeit their lives or pay exceptionally heavy fines. With this principle of law in operation a few judgments would make men realize that they had a responsibility to protect their fellow man...there would be far less carelessness and men and women would be more thoughtful one of the other, especially when they become personally responsible for any damages following careless acts” (p. 145).

### **Application of the Eighth Commandment**

Next are the laws dealing with theft. “If a man steals an ox or a sheep, and slaughters it or sells it, he shall restore five oxen for an oxen and four sheep for a sheep...If the theft is certainly found alive in his hand, whether it is an ox or donkey or sheep, he shall restore double” (22:1-4).

“One of the cases of discontent today,” notes *Digest of the Divine Law*, “is that when a thief is caught and punished, the victim is often not reimbursed for the loss he has suffered. He may have the satisfaction of seeing the one responsible punished, but unless his losses are made good, there is really not justice for him. The law of God requires that the thief make full restoration: and from one hundred to four hundred percent interest, stealing is a very bad business to get into!...The purpose of the law was to deter men from evil in that the severity of the punishment would make them hesitate to commit a crime. There would only have to be a few cases where men were brought to judgment before all men would see and fear to violate the law (148). In this way, individual rights would always be honored, and a judge would determine the guilt and the payment involved (Ex. 22:9).

God was even concerned about a type of stealing where something was borrowed and then destroyed without restoring it to the owner. “And if a man borrows anything from his neighbor, and it becomes injured or dies, the owner of it not being with it, he shall surely make it good.” So a person should be very careful with what is borrowed, for he is responsible for it.

#### **Laws dealing with the 7<sup>th</sup> Commandment**

Now God elaborates on the application of the Seventh Commandment to that society. “If a man entices a virgin who is not betrothed and lies with her, he shall surely pay the bride-price for her to be his wife. If her father utterly refuses to give her to him, he shall pay money according to the bride-price of virgins” (22:16-17). Here we see the respect for a single woman, which in the culture that surrounded them those days, was very negligible. Her father was responsible for her until marriage, and if anyone enticed her to have sexual relations, there would be a very costly price to pay. This measure would help avoid the serious problem we have today of teen single mothers, where many times, the young men simply abandon them and the children. Instead, there were two choices--marrying her and paying the father for her labor he would now lose--or avoid marrying her, but paying a costly dowry.

#### **God's Economic Laws**

There are also economic laws that would be great as the basis for modern labor laws. Here, the rich would not exploit the poor Israelite by charging interest on loans. “If you lend money to any of My people who are poor

among you, you *shall not* be like a moneylender to him; you shall not charge him interest” (22:25). In Ezekiel 22:12, God warned Israel, “In you they take usury and increase; you have made profit from your neighbors by extortion, and *have forgotten Me*.” God never intended for society to be obsessed with the making of money through interest and debts.

“The taking of interest impoverishes a people, perpetuates poverty and works hardship on not only individuals but communities and nations as well” says *Digest of the Divine Law*. “It also changes the medium of exchange from representing values to making it wealth and its possession to be desired more than the possession of true wealth, the things men can use” (p. 90). One rare exception to this law was interest applied to the stranger who refused to accept or abide by the requirements of God's laws.(Deut. 23:20).

#### **God, the judge of all**

In the midst of all these laws, God again reminds them that He is looking at all they do, and will punish them *if they abuse the weak*. He says, “You shall neither mistreat a stranger nor oppress him, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt. You shall not afflict any widow or fatherless child. If you afflict them in any way, and they cry at all to Me, I will surely hear their cry; and My wrath will become hot, and I will kill you with the sword, your wives shall be widows, and your children fatherless” (Ex. 22:21-24).

If the Almighty God says He is concerned about the widow and the fatherless child, how much more should we be aware of their needs and treat them with dignity and respect. All these principles will dovetail into the New Testament, where Jesus Christ will exemplify them, adding the spiritual dimension the Israelites were not able to grasp or apply. That is why He said, “Do not think that I came to destroy the Law or the Prophets. I did not come to destroy but to fulfill...Whoever therefore breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches men so, shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever does and teaches them, he shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven” (Mt. 5:17-19). This is why it is so important to understand *the principles* behind these laws adapted to the Israelite's culture, carnality and limited education. The Ten Commandments were only of limited application to the Israelites, but to God's church, far more can be gleaned and applied, as Jesus Himself revealed. We will learn more of this the next time.