Chapter 33 - Does the Bible Condone Slavery?

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Does the Bible Condone Slavery?

Some think that the New Testament, like the Old, not only tolerated slavery but helped to perpetuate it by making the slaves' obedience to their masters a religious duty. Has the Bible been responsible for the oppression of slaves in the past? No, it has not. In fact, an in-depth study of the Scriptures reveals just the opposite.

It's Not the Civil War

It is extremely important that we first recognize our own understanding of slavery. The cotton plantations, the mistreated Africans, the economy built on suffering—it is all a disgraceful part of the history of the United States. Slaves were not only grossly mistreated, their owners sinfully used selected portions of Scripture to propagandize the slaves to believe God wanted them to be in servitude.

Americans can get "stuck" thinking that the way American slave traders and slave owners treated their slaves is how all other cultures and generations treated their slaves. Slavery in the U.S. was abusive slavery, but slavery was not necessarily abusive in other times and cultures (notwithstanding it deprived people of

cruel, that all slaves lived lives of toil and poverty, or that all slaves were uneducated, or that all slaves were...slaves.

Defining the "Slave" of the Bible

Kyle Butt in his article, *The Bible and Slavery*, says:

> "Frequently, 'slavery' in Bible times was much more of an employer / employee relationship than an owner / slave situation. Even the words used to delineate between a hired servant and a slave are difficult to separate. As Herbert Lockyer noted: In the ancient world, service and slavery were closely related, so much so that one can scarcely distinguish the one from the other. The original words used for 'servants' and 'service' carry a variety of meanings between which it is not always easy to determine what is meant. The Hebrew word *ebed* is like the Greek *doulos*, in that it can be translated as 'slave' or 'servant.' In Exodus 4:10, Moses referred to himself as the 'servant' (*ebed*) of God. Abraham called himself the *ebed* of the angels who came to visit him in Genesis 18:3. In Genesis 39:17-19, Potiphar's wife described Joseph as the Hebrew *ebed*, and Genesis 24:2 talks about the eldest *ebed* in Abraham's house, who 'ruled over all he had'."[212]

Although the Bible does not outlaw or even discourage slavery, it gives instructions on how slaves should be treated, such as:

- "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 your God 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" (Deut 15:12-15).

- "Masters, give your bondservants what is just and fair, knowing that you also have a Master in heaven" (Col 4:1).

Slavery in biblical times was not based strictly on race or nationality. It is based on the victor / vanquished situation, where those who lost a war became enslaved by the winners. It could have also come about from economic hardship, where people needed to sell themselves into slavery to pay off debts.

Often the arrangement was mutually beneficial, like an employer / employee relationship. Job describes this relationship quite well:

- "If I have despised the cause of my male or female servant when they complained against me, what then shall I do when God rises up? When He punishes, how shall I answer Him? Did not the same One fashion us in the womb?" (Job 31:13-15).

Slavery in the New Testament

Debt slavery was still a very real form of restitution in New Testament times.[213] In Matthew 18:21-35, Jesus told a story about a servant who owed his master the equivalent of many thousands of dollars.

Perhaps this man had become a servant due to this enormous debt or was being kept a servant because of the debt.

This [illegible] cannot be used to argue that God is unjust

Final Thoughts

Everyone is a slave to something—drugs, sex, alcohol, pessimism, malicious gossip, or any number of other vices. As St. Paul wrote through inspiration:

- "Do you not know that to whom you present yourselves slaves to obey, you are that one's slaves whom you obey, whether of sin leading to death, or of obedience leading to righteousness? But God be thanked that though you were slaves of sin, yet you obeyed from the heart that form of doctrine to which you were delivered. And having been set free from sin, you became slaves of righteousness" (Rom 6:16-18).

We each must decide which master we will allow to control our lives. As the psalmist so beautifully stated it,

- "I had rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God, than to dwell in the tents of wickedness" (Ps 84:10).

God's injunctions and instructions pertaining to slavery have a clear ring of justice, compassion, mercy and kindness to them.

When analyzed fairly and fully, the idea of slavery gives the honest person one more piece of evidence that points to the perfection of the God of the Bible.[214]

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