

The Bible Concerning Slavery

It is very important to address the subject of slavery in the correct biblical context and in the context of world history. Neither slavery in the New Testament nor slavery in the Old Testament have anything to do with the sort of slavery that millions of people were subjected to under the British Empire (prior to 1833) and in the United States (1789–1861).

It was Evangelical Christians such as William Wilberforce and John Newton who successfully campaigned to bring an end to the slave trade in the British Empire. In fact, the Bible condemns the evil act of kidnaping people and selling them. Exodus 21:16 says, **“Whoever steals a man and sells him, and anyone found in possession of him, shall be put to death.”**

The United States and the United Kingdom are not the only two nations in history to engage in unbiblical forms of slavery. Egypt was the first well-documented nation in the Bible to have harsh slavery. The Romans and the Greeks did, as well. Historically every people group has enslaved people. The first recorded person to own a slave in America was Anthony Johnson. He was not a “white man.” Throughout history people of colour have enslaved white people and white people have enslaved people of colour. The truth of the matter is this: slavery has far less to do with the colour of people’s skin and much more to do with the condition of the human heart. All people, regardless of their background or ethnicity, have sinful hearts and have fallen short of God’s glory.

Slavery, as described in the Bible, was not racial, but rather it was economical and judicial. In Deuteronomy 15:12-18, the Bible gives the law that governed slavery, among the people of Israel. Notice how it was voluntary and a contract was made. On the seventh year, the slave had to be released. Slavery in the Old Testament was not permanent but temporary. The form of slavery that existed in the British Empire was indefinite enslavement. Slavery in ancient Israel required that a released slave was not to go away empty handed. Slaves were given a wage. Slaveholders were required to provide appropriate care for their slaves.

Another term for slave is “bondservant.” In the Old Testament, being a bondservant was a form of judicial punishment. For example, if someone stole money or owed a debt, the offending party would work off the debt by working for the person who the theft was committed against. Under the Old Testament law, people who failed to pay a debt were held accountable. God did make allowances for slavery and indentured servitude, in the Bible. God’s biblical system is far better than the way we treat people who fail to honour a payment today. The modern world likes to mould us into their way of thinking about slavery. We ought to have our minds changed to God’s perfect way and not allow the world to shape our thinking.

You have likely read of debtors’ prison in a Charles Dickens novel. Debtors’ prison is a fact of history. There was a time in England when people were thrown in prison if they could not pay a debt. The prisoner was kept in the jail until the debt was paid. The problem with that system was the prisoner had no means of paying the debt because he was locked up. The prisoner had to rely on someone else to pay the debt for him. Charles Dickens’s father was imprisoned at a debtor’s jail. Dickens became an advocate for debtors’ prison reform, and his novel “Little Dorrit” dealt directly with the issue.

The Bible teaches that all mankind is enslaved by sin and servants of sin. Jesus said in John 8:34, **“Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who practices sin is a slave to sin.”** Everyone who has not come to Christ for salvation is a servant of sin. This is why the Gospel is Good News. Christ suffered on the cross and died to take away the power of sin. He died to make His people free from the penalty, practice and presence of sin. Romans 6:18 says, **“having been set free from sin, have become slaves of righteousness.”** In this passage, the Bible mentions being a servant of righteousness, which is a great joy. Those who have been redeemed from slavery to sin are bought by the precious blood of the Lord Jesus Christ. Christians are no longer either servants of sin nor slaves to sin, but rather servants of righteousness, godliness and holiness.

Galatians 5:1 says, **“For freedom Christ has set us free; stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.”** Christ came to free us from sin. Those who repent and believe the Gospel, those who receive Jesus Christ as Saviour, are forever free in Him. The Christian hasn’t been redeemed to continue in unrighteousness, but rather he or she has been freed to serve Christ in the world. The Christian is to be a vessel of blessing to the nation.