

Confronting Christianity – Part 10

Doesn't the Bible Condone Slavery?

Crosspoint – Dave Spooner – Nov. 6th, 2022

Intro:

- This week we have on deck another sensitive and emotional topic, and for some of us, it is very personal. I am going to address the question, "Doesn't the Bible condone slavery?" similar to the way I addressed the issue of homosexuality last week. We are going to look at what is recorded in the Bible, in both the Old and New Testaments, as well as look at slavery throughout history and how various "Christians" have dealt with the issue to help us formulate an informed response.
- Again, like last week, this message is nowhere close to covering all the issues in great detail, and there have been books, papers, and articles written in droves on this subject. Also, I want to acknowledge that the book *Confronting Christianity* by Rebecca McLaughlin has been helping to shape this series as well as this message.

Slavery in the Old Testament

- The first place we read about slavery is in the story of Abraham from the first book of the Bible, Genesis. Abraham and Sarah were unable to conceive, so Sarah told Abraham to "go in to my servant; it may be that I shall obtain children by her" (Gen. 16:3), and Abraham did so. In the past, some have pointed to this example as a justification for slavery and even sexual exploitation of slaves. I want to be quick to point out that not all descriptions in the Bible are prescriptions for God's people. There is plenty of evil and ungodly behavior seen in the Bible, even from some of the "heroes of the faith," which does not mean it is okay for us to do those things as well. Abraham's decision to sleep with Hagar was clearly outside the perfect will of God and showed a lack of faith, not a fulfillment of God's plan, and should not be seen as a license to participate in this type of behavior. God, in His goodness and grace, hears and sees Hagar, takes care of her, and extends His blessing to her and the child fathered by Abraham.
- Later on, Abraham's great-grandson Joseph was sold into slavery by his brothers (Gen. 37). Genesis spends a lot of time on his story and how God worked through this sinful act as Joseph later became a ruler in Egypt who ended up saving his family (which also is a depiction of Christ who was rejected by his brothers then gave His life to save His family). The story of Joseph also points out some of the differences between slavery in Old Testament times and slavery in modern times. Rebecca McLaughlin, on page 177, records:

First, ancient slavery was not yoked to racial hierarchy. Hagar was an Egyptian slave to Hebrews; Joseph was a Hebrew slave to Egyptians. Second, it was common for people to sell themselves into slavery, as it represented a form of employment and was preferable to destitution. Third, while many slaves in the ancient world undoubtedly suffered the kind of brutality and exploitation experienced by many enslaved Africans in America, advancement was also possible within the slave status and beyond—even to the point of becoming a senior civil servant.

- Now, after the death of Joseph, the Hebrew people became enslaved. The Bible goes into considerable detail on how difficult it was and how bad they were treated, even to the point of the extermination of infant males (Ex. 1). God does not let this deed go unpunished and later exterminates all the first-born sons of the Egyptians while the angel of death "passes over" the

houses of the Israelites because of the blood of the lamb (another reference to Christ). God frees His people from slavery, making the story of God's people the story of emancipated slaves.

- Rebecca McLaughlin does an excellent job of describing the rest of the story concerning slavery in the Old Testament:

When God gave his people the law, it included repeated reminders that they were once slaves, and this was to inform how they would treat slaves, immigrants, widows, and orphans. Slave catching was a capital offense: **"Whoever steals a man and sells him, and anyone found in possession of him, shall be put to death"** (Ex. 21:16). Slaves were given a range of protections and privileges: for example, slaves were included in the day of rest (Ex. 20:10); if their masters did them permanent bodily harm, they had to be released (Ex. 21:26); and any Hebrew man or woman sold into slavery had to be released after six years and given gifts—unless he or she chose to remain (Ex. 21:2; Deut. 15:12–16).

Israelites were also commanded to offer refuge to escaped slaves: **"You shall not give up to his master a slave who has escaped from his master to you. He shall dwell with you, in your midst, in the place that he shall choose within one of your towns, wherever it suits him. You shall not wrong him"** (Deut 23:15). Protections extended to those captured in warfare. It was standard practice for ancient armies to rape the women of conquered peoples, or to keep them as sex slaves. But the Old Testament specifies that if an Israelite soldier desired a captive woman, he must give her a month to mourn for her family and then marry her. It also forbade him from subsequently deciding that he was done with her and selling her to someone else (Deut. 21:10–14). In our cultural framework, where arranged marriage of any kind seems oppressive, these verses sound abhorrent. But at a time when women did not expect to choose their husbands, and where a woman's livelihood depended on the provision of a male relative, this framework offered captive women protection and respect.

In summary, the Old Testament bans slave catching, provides protections for slaves, and invites us to see the world through enslaved eyes: from Hagar, to Joseph, to the whole people of Israel at their exodus from Egypt. (McLaughlin, Rebecca. *Confronting Christianity* pp. 177-178).

Slavery in the New Testament

- Perhaps you did not know this, but one of the books in the New Testament is a letter from the Apostle Paul to a slave owner concerning the slave owner's runaway slave, telling the owner that he is to receive the slave back as a brother and to treat him with love and respect. The name of the book is Philemon. Paul met Onesimus as a prisoner in Rome and described him with endearing terms. Paul calls Onesimus "my child – whose father I became in my imprisonment" (Phil. 10). In sending him back, Paul says he is sending his "very heart" (Phil. 12) and instructs Philemon to take him back as "more than a bondservant, but as a beloved brother" (Phil. 16). Philemon is to receive him back as he would receive Paul back from his imprisonment (Phil. 17), and if Onesimus owes him anything, Paul would pay it. Paul greatly elevates Onesimus's status to that of one of his dearly beloved children and insists that Onesimus be treated with love and honor as such. Paul also encouraged slaves to gain their freedom if they had an opportunity (I Cor. 7:21).
- Now, remember from last week that Paul, in his letter to Timothy, at one point lists a number of people who are "lawless and disobedient, ungodly and sinners, unholy and profane" (I Tim. 1:9).

On that list are "enslavers"—those people who intentionally enslave others—which is indeed what took place in the transatlantic slave trade of modern times. This verse outrightly condemns slavery and enslavers of this kind for all time. Let me be very clear—the kind of slavery we have seen in this country, called “chattel slavery,” meaning slavery that makes the other person someone’s property, to be bought, sold, abused with no rights—is and always has been outlawed and condemned in the Bible. Those who taught and did otherwise, not only abused people, but did violence to the word of God.

Slavery in History

- There is a long and detailed list of slavery of all kinds throughout human history. There are egregious evils that have been done to slaves, including those who have been enslaved in this country. The Bible has been wrongly and unjustifiably used to excuse this evil in our country in the past. Because of their Christian convictions and right understanding of the Bible, there also have been people who have fought with courage and given their lives to rid this evil from our land and many other lands as well. Rebecca McLaughlin does a masterful job in recording some of the dates and deeds of people who have fought the evil of slavery and segregation, including Gregory of Nyssa, Augustine, John Chrysostom, Thomas Aquinas, William Wilberforce, Charles Spurgeon, John Wesley, Hannah More, Harriet Beecher Stowe, David Walker, Frederic Douglass, Henry Highland Garnet, Harriet Tubman, Sojourner Truth and Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. I would encourage you to read her full accounting.
- She also notes the remarkable faith of those who had been captured in slavery but maintained a robust and powerful faith, even when they were forbidden to worship or were punished for doing so. It is a testament to God's amazing providential grace that in our world and in this nation, those who have suffered the most and have been "looked down on" by so many are often the ones who have the strongest faith and will be considered the greatest when God sets all things new and all things right.

1 Cor 1:27-29 ESV

But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; 28 God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, 29 so that no human being might boast in the presence of God.

Conclusion

- Jesus is the great emancipator who freed all humankind from our greatest enslavement, our enslavement to sin which leads to death. **"For freedom Christ has set us free; stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery" (Gal 5:1 ESV).**

Rom 6:6-8-11 ESV

We know that our old self was crucified with him in order that the body of sin might be brought to nothing, so that we would no longer be enslaved to sin. 7 For one who has died has been set free from sin. 8 Now if we have died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him.

- In baptism, we identify with Christ, and we declare that in Him, our bonds of sin and death have been broken and we have received new life through the one who has set us free. Therefore we

dedicate our lives to knowing and following Him and declaring to all that we have decided to follow Jesus.

- Transition to the faith stories of those being baptized and to the baptism.