

Does God Condone Slavery?

David 2014

Many atheists and skeptics like to make the claim that the Bible condones slavery. It's true that there is a lot of slavery in the Bible mainly because there was a lot of slavery in ancient times. Studies show that as much as 2/3 of the Roman Empire was made up of slaves. In the New Testament Paul gives instruction to Christians who are both slaves and slave owners. When God gave the Law to Israel, He made provisions for slavery.

The problem with the subject of slavery in the Bible is that we make an etymological fallacy, or commit the fallacy of presentism. We tend to approach the subject of slavery as 21st century Americans or Europeans. When the Bible mentions slavery we automatically bring in our pre-conceived notions of the British/American slave trade of the African peoples. Instead we need to look at slavery as someone living in Israel 1000 years before Christ or in the Roman Empire in the 1st century.

The Mosaic Law

In ancient Israel it was a fairly common practice to sell oneself into slavery to pay off debts. Leviticus 25:39-41 says, "If your brother has grown poor among you, and sells himself to you; you shall not make him to serve as a slave. As a hired servant, and as a temporary resident, he shall be with you; he shall serve with you until the Year of Jubilee: then he shall go out from you, he and his children with him, and shall return to his own family, and to the possession of his fathers."

Also a thief could sell himself into slavery to make amends for his thievery if he did not have the money to do so. (Exodus 22:3) The reason there was slavery mentioned in the Law was so that slaves would be treated lawfully. Leviticus 25 verses 43 and 46 say of both Hebrew slaves and slaves from among the other nations, not to rule them ruthlessly, but fear the Lord your God. Verse 48 also says that if one becomes a slave, their family retains the right to redeem them when they save up enough money to repay their debt.

Exodus 22:2 also says that on the seventh year of slavery, the slave must be freed. Deuteronomy 15:12-18 adds to that, "you shall not send him away empty handed, but furnish him liberally from your flock and from your threshing floor and from your wine vat." Exodus 21:20 says, "If a man strikes his servant or his maid with a rod, and he dies under his hand, he shall surely be punished." Verse 26-27 say, "If a man strikes his servant's eye, or his maid's eye, and destroys it, he shall let him go free for his eye's sake. If he strikes out his male servant's tooth, or his female servant's tooth, he shall let him go free for his tooth's sake." No provision was given under the Law to be cruel to slaves.

So why did the law allow for slavery? Probably the same reason that it allowed for divorce. Jesus explains why in Matthew 19:7-8. The Pharisees ask Him, "Why then did Moses command us to give her a bill of divorce, and divorce her?" He said to them, 'Moses, because of the hardness of your hearts, allowed you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it has not been so.'

Slavery was probably set in the Law for the same reason divorce was: because of the hardness of man's heart.

British/American Slavery

When we think of slavery in the 21st century, we immediately think of the slave trade. That is different from slavery 3000 years ago. Slavery was initiated via kidnapping, was often very cruel, and wasn't terminated after a set amount of time. All of these are sinful.

Exodus 21:16 says, "Anyone who kidnaps someone and sells him, or if he is found in his hand, he shall surely be put to death." This seems to outright condemn the slavery practiced in America. If someone claims that the Bible condones slavery bring them to this verse.

1 Timothy 1:9-10 puts kidnapper/enslavers in the same realm as murderers. "Law is not made for a righteous man, but for the lawless and insubordinate, for the ungodly and sinners, for the unholy and profane, for murderers of fathers and murderers of mothers, for manslayers, for the sexually immoral, for homosexuals, for slave-traders, for liars, for perjurers, and for any other thing contrary to the sound doctrine."

The British/American slave trade was definitely immoral and God has some things to say about it in His Word. It is interesting to note that the two most influential men in the abolition movement were devout Christians. John Newton, the author of the famous hymn Amazing Grace, was the first mate on a slave trading ship. After his conversion to evangelical Christianity, he renounced the slave trade and joined the Anglican Church.

The other man, William Wilberforce, was an evangelical Christian and a friend of John Newton. Wilberforce was a politician in the British Parliament and worked himself to death to bring about the abolition of slavery in the British Empire. Wilberforce worked for 52 years to bring about the Slave Trade Act of 1807 and later the Slavery Abolition Act 1833. He died just three days after hearing that the Act made it through Parliament.

Slavery in the New Testament

There are several mentions of slavery in the New Testament as well as the Old Testament. Paul says in Colossians 3:22, "Slaves, obey in all things those who are your masters according to the flesh, not just when they are looking, as men pleasers, but in singleness of heart, fearing God." Paul goes on to say in Colossians 4:1, "Masters, give to your servants that which is just and equal, knowing that you also have a Master in heaven."

Paul says the same thing in his letter to the Ephesians. Ephesians 6:5-9 says, "Slaves be obedient to those who according to the flesh are your masters, with fear and trembling, in singleness of your heart, as to Christ; not in the way of service only when eyes are on you, as men pleasers; but as servants of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart with good will doing service, as to the Lord, and not to men; knowing that whatever good thing each one does, he will receive the same again from the Lord, whether he is bound or free. You masters, do the same things to them,

and give up threatening, knowing that He who is both their Master and yours is in heaven, and there is no partiality with Him.”

Paul recognizes the fact that there are slaves and slave owners during the time of his writing. His message to them is essentially, “You are all brothers in Christ and you are to show Christ-like character in all your dealings. Slaves, be Godly in your work, and masters be Godly to your slaves.” This sentiment is again noted by Paul in 1 Corinthians 12:13, Colossians 3:11, and Galatians 3:28. There is no difference between slaves and freemen before Christ. All are made in the image of God and because of that have inherent worth and value. And whether you are a slave or a freeman, every Christian is a slave to Christ having been bought by the blood of the Lamb. Paul mentions slavery several times in his letters as a parallel to our slavery to Christ.

1 Corinthians 12:13 says, “For by one Spirit are we all baptized into one body, whether we be Jews or Gentiles, whether we be slave or free; and have been all made to drink into one Spirit.” Colossians 3:11 says, “There is neither Greek nor Jew, circumcision nor uncircumcision, Barbarian, Scythian, slave nor free: but Christ is all, and in all.” Galatians 3:28 says, “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus.”

In 1 Corinthians 7:20-24, Paul says, “Let each man stay in that calling in which he was called. Were you called being a slave? Don’t let that bother you, but if you get an opportunity to become free, use it. For he who was called in the Lord being a slave is the Lord’s free man. Likewise he who was called being free is Christ’s slave. You were bought with a price. Don’t become slaves of men. Brothers, let each man, in whatever condition he was called, stay in that condition with God.

Why doesn’t Jesus or Paul just outright condemn slavery? I think the reason is the same as why Jesus didn’t take a side on Rome’s taxation of Israel. His purpose was not to bring about political change. Jesus had no political agenda; His purpose was to preach the Gospel. If Jesus or Paul had said that slavery was wrong and slaves should rebel against their masters, all kinds of people would rally behind them: believers and unbelievers. Slaves would become Christians to justify escaping or being fraudulent towards their masters, rather than because of a knowledge of sin and a desire to follow Christ. The purpose of the teachings of Christ is to change the heart, not outward appearances. And that happened a lot; after converting to Christianity many slave-owners did release their slaves. If all the Word of God accomplished was a world of freemen who were still slaves to sin and on their way to Hell, it would have been in vain. Instead one can serve God in whatever circumstance He has placed us.

Philemon

Paul’s most personal letter was to his friend Philemon. Philemon was a wealthy man who opened up his home for the church at Colossae to meet (vs. 2). Being pretty wealthy Philemon owned a slave named Onesimus. The occasion of the latter was that Onesimus stole from Philemon and ran away (vs. 18). He eventually made his way to Rome where Paul was in prison. Paul shared the Gospel with him and he became converted.

Being somewhat alone and in prison, Paul would have like Onesimus to stay with him, but since Onesimus still belonged to Philemon, his obligation was to send him back (vs. 13). The penalty for a slave stealing and escaping was death so Paul sent with him a letter to his master. Paul asked Philemon to deal graciously with Onesimus and promised to repay whatever debt Onesimus owed.

Paul asserted that he could command Philemon to “do what is proper” but he asked him as a friend to welcome Onesimus “no longer as a slave, but as a beloved brother” (vs. 16). Whether Onesimus is a slave or becomes a free man, he is a Christian and that makes him Philemon’s brother in the Lord. In verse 21 Paul writes, “Having confidence in your obedience, I write to you, knowing that you will do even beyond what I say.” Paul is not outright telling Philemon to free Onesimus, but he is implying that he should. It is possible that Onesimus was freed and went back to Rome to minister to Paul. In verse 14, Paul implies that he would like Onesimus to come back to him.

Conclusion

The Bible does not condemn slavery. Instead Paul gives Christian slaves and masters rules and advice as to how to live a Godly life within the system of slavery. Paul did mention in 1 Corinthians 7:21 that if a slave is able to become free, do so. Studies show that after the end of the first century when people in the Roman Empire began to be converted to Christianity, they took the principles of love and brotherhood that the Bible teaches and began freeing their slaves. The same idea took place in Britain 18 centuries later. Based on the principles and work of the Word of God, men were led to abolish slavery.

The purpose of the Word of God is not to change the world it is to change the heart of man. It is then out of a changed heart that the outward changes flow. That was the whole idea of Christ’s teachings. Anyone can look good before men (i.e. the Pharisees), but God looks at the heart of man. (1 Samuel 16:7) In light of this, is your heart right before God? If it is not, remember John Newton: “Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me. I once was lost but now am found, was blind, but now I see.” And at the end of his life he reminisced, “Although my memory’s fading, I remember two things very clearly: I am a great sinner and Christ is a great Savior.”