

# The Bible and Slavery

*Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.*

Date: 08 March 2023

Preacher: Hunter Nicholson

[0:00] So I will pray and then we'll spend some time thinking about slavery and then we'll spend some time praying together.

So let's pray. Heavenly Father, we thank You for this time together tonight. We thank You that You have spoken to us and You've spoken to us not only through prophets and priests, but You've spoken to us through Your Son.

And we praise You for that, we praise You for the gospel, and we pray that this time that we spend thinking about Your Word would not be in vain, but that it would remind us that we can trust You and that You are good and love Your Son.

So let me pray. Okay, so the series that we're in is Believing the Bible in the Modern World.

And every week we've looked at a different, David are you okay? Just so I know, am I good to get it? Okay. Every week we've been looking at a different aspect of Scripture, what it means to say to be trust Scripture, why we can trust Scripture.

[1:09] So we said that the Bible is God-breathed. These books are divinely inspired. What the Bible said when it was originally written is exactly what God wanted it to say, even if it was also written by man.

The Bible is infallible, so it was originally written without errors. We trust that there were no mistakes when it was written down.

Its theology is true, and its history is true. And then we just for last week, we took a break to talk about political issues in Scotland, but just before that we talked about how the Bible has a clarity to it, or what is often called a perspicuity.

So we can read the Bible, and we believe that we're able to understand it, and we can interpret it together as a church. And of course, the Modern World, we're talking about the Holy Scripture in the Modern World, because the Modern World would raise challenges to all of those things that I've just said.

And we're going to shift focus a little bit tonight by talking about just one specific ethical issue that deals with Scripture, which is the issue of slavery.

[2:28] And this is an issue that's brought against the Bible, the issue of slavery. And the question is this, how can we as Christians justify the fact that the Bible at times seems to condone or to affirm the institution of slavery?

And that's a question that is just as valid in the New Testament as it is in the Old, because both Testaments speak about slavery. So what do we as Christians say that when the criticism is brought that says the Bible affirms slavery and isn't that horrible?

And there's a real dilemma that isn't just about slavery. It's about the doctrine of Scripture. And here's the dilemma. Someone can come to you and say, well, let me feel like this.

One element of infallibility is what you might call ethical infallibility, which means that part of when we say that the Bible is infallible, part of our claim is that if God through the Bible says that something is good, it really is good.

And if through the Bible, God said something is evil, it really is evil. Now today in the Western world, there's virtual universal acceptance, even I think among everyone in this room, I hope, that slavery, as it was practiced 200 years ago, was very bad.

[ 3 : 55 ] That's unambiguous. If the scriptures teach that slavery is good, then the Bible cannot be the word of God.

That would be the logic. That would be the tension that would be created if the Bible part of slavery, and yet we all here say slavery is bad. So what do we do with that? And you see how this can become a wedge issue in the doctrine of Scripture, because if a person can point to one area of Scripture where the Bible says something is good, when it's actually as bad, then you say, well, if we can't trust the Bible here, how can we trust the Bible anywhere?

So the question of slavery becomes much bigger than the question of slavery itself. It becomes, can we really trust what the Bible says about what's right and what's wrong?

So that's what we're going to talk about tonight in just a few minutes, or just a few minutes. This really became a hot issue in the 19th century for obvious reasons. You have major slave debates going on in Great Britain and the US, and the debates at that time weren't, the debates at that time were about whether the Bible affirmed slavery or not.

Even some theologians during the time period would say, took either position on the issue. Some theologians said, the Bible affirms slavery, and therefore in our 19th century context we should uphold it, and some theologians said the opposite, that we should not affirm slavery because the Bible doesn't affirm slavery.

[ 5 : 29 ] What no one debated was that the Bible assumes slavery. The Bible talks about slavery often in the Old and New Testaments. The Bible assumes slavery, and part of what happens is you can go from saying the Bible assumes slavery and say, because the Bible assumes slavery, therefore it is affirmed.

That seems to be what happened for a lot of theologians who wanted to affirm slavery. They would say, well, the Bible talks about it, gives regulations at some points about it, therefore slavery is good.

So one of the most famous US Presbyterian theologians was a man named James Henley Thornwell. He said, one of his quote from him, slavery is a good and merciful division of labor which God's providence has given us.

We cherish the institution from principle. At the time he was probably one of the two most well respected Presbyterian theologians in the United States.

The very same year another US minister, Henry Warbeacher said slavery is monstrous and evil and simple. So the question is how do we think about the Bible and slavery?

[ 6 : 51 ] And the most obvious claim that I want to make from the outset, which is just a logical claim, is just because the Bible, the presence of the institution of slavery in the Bible, does not necessarily equate to the affirmation of slavery in the Bible.

It doesn't necessarily mean that the Bible's making it plain that slavery is good. That's certainly the case with other issues in the Bible.

There's an analogy that could be of like, colligion. You won't find, oftentimes you'll find a case in the Bible where a person is involved in a polygamist relationship in the Old Testament.

That's not a surprise, but I read from across that quite often. And the Bible doesn't outright say that it's wrong. But what you find as you read the Old Testament as a whole is the narrative seems to point to this idea that polygamy never ends well.

So it may not condemn a person every single time that polygamy happens, yet the overall narrative of the Old Testament is that it doesn't end well. So for example, the first person who commits polygamy in the Old Testament is if I knew it is, he's not the most famous person you could think of.

[8:20] Genesis 4 is in Lamech. And Lamech was known, he was offered in Scripture as someone who epitomized evil. And he brings his wives to him in the Scripture to brag about how violent he is.

He's the first bling. And then you get these other stories like Jacob had two wives and two concubines. And so much of Jacob's story is about all the conflict that happens because of that.

And so the Bible never looks at Jacob and says, it never comes out and says what he did was wrong. But it clearly points to the negative consequences of his blingless relationship.

The same with Solomon. Solomon had 700 wives, 300 concubines. And because of that, the kingdom was torn from his hands because of the concubines and the wives led in the strain.

All that to say, sometimes the Bible won't condemn something outright, and yet the narrative makes it clear that it's wrong and that leads to destruction.

[9:27] There's a theologian named Lionel Windsor who gives an example to kind of illustrate how this could be the case in ways that we understand and talks about how the movie Schindler's List. When you watch Schindler's List, to make their point, the director of Schindler's List is that Steven Spielberg.

At the end of the movie, he could have in the credit scene put racism is wrong. And that would have been totally superfluous.

Superfluous because the entire movie never outright says that racism is wrong. And yet it's the point of the entire movie. And you can say that's what a lot of the narratives in the Old Testament do is they may not always tell us right from wrong, and yet when you trace them out, they make it clear.

So all I'm trying to say there is the existence of a practice in the Bible, just because something happens in the Bible, doesn't always mean the Bible is saying that it's right.

So and yet, and this is bringing me to my next point, and yet even on the surface level, even a surface level reading of the Bible seems to point sometimes to the idea that the Bible really is upholding or affirming slavery.

[10:45] Sometimes it appears as if the Bible is doing more than just saying there was slavery. It seems to be condoning it. So for example, in the Old Testament, Exodus chapter 21, almost the entire chapter is devoted to rules about slaves.

And it begins by saying, when you buy a Hebrew slaver, that seems to go beyond acknowledging that something happens, and it's actually God saying, here is how you operate within this context of slavery.

And the same thing happens in the New Testament. In Ephesians 6-5, Paul looks at household slaves, household servants, and he says, bond servants or slaves, obey your earthly masters with fear and trembling, with a sincere heart as you would Christ.

Now, I don't know about you, but I think to modern years that can make us uncomfortable. Paul looks at a slave and says, obey your master. This is what you're called to do.

And you can say, well, maybe that's just the Old Testament or maybe that's just Paul. But even Jesus, a lot of his illustrations revolve around slavery in ways that you would almost want to say, if slavery so wrong, why would you ever illustrate something with it?

[12:00] Why would you ever use a slave as an example of what it's like to be a Christian? So for instance, in at least 13 of Jesus' parables, he uses slaves in the illustration.

In his most famous moment, the last supper, when he's getting out and he's washing his disciples feet, he tells them that they will have to wash each other's feet.

And the way that he describes it is he says, you've seen what I have done for you. Are servants greater than a master? And he's using slave language there.

He's saying, listen, if I am your master and you are the slaves, if I had to sweep down to wash feet, will you not also have to wash feet?

So maybe we run past those, but he is using slave language there that to modern years could be deemed as offensive. And the question is just what is he doing there?

[13:04] How do we understand when all of us would say slavery as we know it is wrong? And sometimes in your Bible, the English translation that you hold will often try to diminish, to try to subvert your eyes from the tension there by using other words.

So instead of slave, it will use words like boncer or servant. And in the Bible that I was using to prepare for this lesson, basically every time that a word could have been translated as slave, there was a footnote that said, please see the preface of this whole Bible.

And in the preface of the Bible, Excel may wrote, we have chosen not to use the word slave because we think it's misleading. And that's a really interesting claim to make.

And the reason the word slave is misleading is because, and I think it's a, it's completely fair for the translators to do that. When you and I hear the word slave, what comes to our mind is the slavery that we know about and read about from the 19th century.

The child slave system where people were taken from their homes in Africa and shipped all across the world. It was racial and based.

[14:27] It was never ending. You could never get out of the slave situation that you were in. And it was a brutality on a scale that most of us can't comprehend.

So when we see the word slave, all of those images come to our mind. And so I want to make two points as well for the rest of this lesson about how, given that that's what we have in our mind when we think about slavery, two points about how to think of slavery in the Bible.

The first is this, when scripture speaks of slavery, it points to a different slavery. And I'm not saying it points to a good slavery. I'm saying it points to a different slavery.

Slavery in the ancient Near East, and I want to say ancient Near East, I'm talking about the Old Testament, and slavery in the Greco-Roman world, which would be the world of the New Testament.

The systems of slavery that existed in those worlds looked vastly different from the slavery that we know of from the 19th century.

[15:35] And even though the Old Testament and New Testament slave are so different, they're both different in ways that are both different from, that's a confusing sentence I just said.

Slavery and the Old Testament and slavery in the New Testament are different from one another, but they're both very different from the slavery that we know from the 19th century.

And so I want to talk about what some of those differences are and what we mean when we talk about slavery in the Bible. Some obvious differences. Slavery in the Old and the New Testament, virtually wherever it's practiced in the world, was never race-based.

It was not based on the idea that certain races were inferior to other races, and therefore some races had a God-given mandate to be placed lower than others.

Slaves in the Old and the New Testament, both as it was practiced in Judaism and as it was practiced in Greece and Rome in general, slaves were not distinguished by the color of their clothes, nor by their clothing or their speech, which is a really interesting point.

[16:51] So if you have been walking through the streets of Athens or through the streets of Rome in the first century AD, it would not have been obvious to you who was the slave and who was the free person.

So what I'm getting at is this is a totally different system that we're thinking about. Slaves and free people in the New Testament, for example, often performed the same tasks, so they were often indistinguishable.

Sometimes a slave had jobs that were far more important than a free person had. So for example, the House of Caesar, which was the most powerful house in the first century, the House of Caesar had 20,000 slaves in it, and those 20,000 slaves did the bulk of the administrative work in the entire Roman Empire.

So some of those men and women who served as slaves in the House of Caesar had positions of authority that far outmatched the majority of people in the Roman Empire.

I need to say this several times along the way. I'm not trying to make an apologetic for slavery, and I'll talk about how bad it could get as well. I'm just saying you have to realize the system we're talking about is very different than the one that many of us know of.

[18:08] In the New Testament, especially, household slaves were often very well educated and needed to be well educated to perform the duties that were assigned to them.

So one of the illustrations that Jesus uses in Luke chapter 12 about, he says, always be ready, be like the steward who is managing his master's house, be ready when the father comes.

Slaves were often essentially the CEO of large household economies. They were well educated sometimes. As the Old Testament and the New Testament were often paid, they made wages.

They entered into slavery for various reasons. One of the most common reasons why a person would, what's the word for intentionally, enter into slavery is to pay off debts.

That's why sometimes the Bible would translate slaying as bondservant, because some people choose to go into slavery to pay off a debt for a certain period of time after which they're freed.

[19:28] Of course, some slaves were captives of the war, which would have probably been something similar to what happened in the Old Testament when God's people were exiled in places like Babylon.

What do you find happening? Some of the smartest Hebrews were ascended to the highest levels of power in Babylon. Of course, they were always in some form of slavery.

They couldn't go back home. Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, these men had positions of authority, and yet they were also under authority and had to stay in Babylon to do the work that was assigned to them.

People often, and this may be more rare, but people often sold themselves into slavery to improve their social standing or to improve their economic standing because they were so poor before him.

Rarely was anyone in the Old Testament or in the New Testament a slave for life. One theologian said of the Greco-Roman slave that a Greco-Roman slave could reasonably hope to be emancipated after 10 to 20 years of service or by their 30s at the latest.

[20:47] In Exodus, the general rule for slavery in the book of Exodus is in Exodus 21. It opens by saying, when a man or woman is sold into slavery after they have been a slave for six years, they shall go free.

A slave at that point, and this is written in the rules, a slave has the right to remain a slave, but if they want to go free after six years, they're obligated by law to be freed.

Slaves could save up money, they could buy themselves freedom. All of these things are pointing to this idea that the slavery that we know from the 19th century looked very different from the slavery of the Old Testament.

If for no other reason, then it's far easier to make general claims about slavery in the 19th century than it was about slavery in the ancient world.

It looked vastly different across many different situations in the ancient world. The slavery of the 19th century systematically brutal, race-based, built on the belief that an entire race is inferior to another entire race.

[ 22 : 02 ] It's always involuntary. A slave is a slave for life. Education was rare and discouraged.

And the African slave trade was built on the idea of kidnapping. Those slaves came from something they were forcibly taken from their homes.

Now slavery in the ancient world could also get very bad, especially if a slave was assigned to the mines or to the plantator piece.

In those situations, it could be just as brutal as the worst slavery that we've heard of. But most likely the kind of slaves that Paul would have interacted with would have been urban slaves working in household economies, which would have looked very different.

And so when you read about the Ephesians, he gives rules to husbands and wives, children, and then he gives rules to slaves, which is this idea that those slaves are a part of a household economy.

[ 23 : 09 ] Paul could have been interacting with slaves who were far more educated than he was, performing duties that were basically at the height of the economy where they were living.

So all that to say, and then I'm going to come to my last point, all that to say, scripture points to a different slavery. Not necessarily a better slavery, and we can still say that that slavery is unjust, but it points to a different slavery than the one that we know.

But we don't want to stop there because, and this is my final point, scripture also points to the death of slavery. Scripture also points to the death of slavery.

So when you read the Bible, the Bible assumes slavery in both the Old and the New Testament, but the ethic and the logic of the Bible is always a movement towards freedom.

And there are several ways that we can reason this out. One is just the narrative of God's people. So what is the most defining event of God's people in the Old Testament, we might argue, is the Exodus.

[ 24 : 20 ] God's people knew themselves to be slaves who had been abused, who had been mistreated. And the story of salvation in the Old Testament, the foreshadow of God's salvation in the New Testament, is God takes these people who are slaves and he gives them their freedom.

He rescues them from bondage. And what's interesting is when you read the rules that are given to God's people in Exodus and in Deuteronomy, as they're coming out of that slavery is, God will often remind them never to forget that they were slaves, never forget to forget that they were oppressed people once.

So in Deuteronomy 15, when Moses is giving the rules about slavery, he also tells them, he says, remember that you were slaves in Egypt and the Lord your God redeemed him.

And the context is he's saying, this is when he says, once a person has been a slave for six years, you must set them free. And then he goes on to say, when you set them free, you must give them everything that they need to go free.

And so what you often find is rather than affirming slavery as an institution and calling for its perpetuation, maybe a better way to think of what's happening in the Old Testament is God is actually limiting the extent of slavery.

[25:50] And he's saying, you can't hold a person longer than this. There's limits that you must put on the way that you engage in slavery, which would have been a common practice in the ancient Near East.

Secondly, the Bible in the Old Testament and the New Testament unconditionally condemns kidnapping of human beings, always and forever.

First Timothy 9, Paul gives this list of sins that are unholy or unrighteous. And one of them that he mentions is the enslaver. He says the enslaver is someone who is unholy and profane, the enslaver.

And if you're familiar with the, this is fun trivia for tonight, the Westminster larger catechism definition of stealing in the 8th command says that one of the sins of the 8th commandment is what they call man stealing.

So even the Westminster Confession says that it puts in writing that one of the ways that you can break the 8th commandment is by man stealing.

[27:03] But this goes back to the Old Testament as well. Deuteronomy 24-7, if someone is caught kidnapping a fellow Israelite, or, and this is a quote, Deuteronomy 24-7, if someone is caught kidnapping a fellow Israelite and selling them as a slave, the kidnapper must die.

You must purge the evil from among. So stealing other people is so serious that it invites the death and will be in the Old Testament. And then I need to come to a close very quickly here, but in the New Testament, Christ created an environment where all people are equal.

So that as Paul says in Galatians 3:28, there is neither Jew nor Greek. There's neither slave nor free. There's neither male or female.

We're all one in Christ. So the argument that you'll hear most theologians make about what is the Bible actually saying about slavery is they're saying, even if Paul never came out and said slavery as an institution must go today, what the New Testament does, and especially what Paul does in his letters is he lays the groundwork for an understanding of interhuman relationships that such that slavery cannot survive and dies.

Because if you really begin to accept the idea that all humans are made in the image of God, and not only that, but all humans are equal, that God made them equal and there's no inferiority, then it's hard to imagine how a system like slavery can perpetuate itself.

[28:41] So one of the best examples is the book of Philemon where Paul tells Philemon, Onesimus has run away from Philemon, right?

And Paul sends Onesimus back and Paul tells Philemon to treat Onesimus. He says, don't treat him as a slave. Treat him as more than a slave.

Treat him as a brother. And to be honest, it's not clear what he actually means by that. Does he mean to free him? Like, what is he actually asking him to do?

But regardless, he's calling for a radical change in the way that Philemon understands that relationship. So that in the centuries that come afterwards, many Christian theologians begin stepping forward and saying slavery as an institution is a sin.

And there's this great, often the first place you would see that finding expression is in the church itself. So Craig Keener, who's a philologist that studies the book of Acts, he says that at least in later Christianity, and by later he means like first, second, third, fourth century, at least by later Christianity, a slave's status in the external society did not dictate their status in God's church.

[ 30 : 09 ] Slaves could rise to the office of the bishop. Now I know that some of you think that's awful because you think the church should not have bishops.

But there's a wonderful plan being made there that even if a slave was forced to continue in this situation to the outside world, inside the church, he couldn't become a bishop.

And that's a powerful testimony to the way that Christianity transforms society first inside the church. And then you see people like William Wilbur Ford, who begins to push itself outward into society.

So I have a lot more to say, but I think I'm just going to stop there. And I'm going to say that's good news. The only thing I'll add is, I think this topic of slavery is an example of a kind of church challenge that can be made against scripture.

If a person's new in their faith, they can feel really shaken by it because they don't have the tools to know how to reason through it. And I suppose maybe the only thing I'll say about that is I'm thankful.

[ 31 : 16 ] And I know that many of you are thankful that as we've grown up, and I'm sure the oldest people here know far more than I do, sometimes we come to scriptures and we can hear the world telling us, this part doesn't make sense.

And we look at it and we don't quite know how to make sense of it. And as we grow in our faith, we begin to trust Jesus more and more.

So as you come across these things and you work your way through it, when you come to the next problem, we say, I know that Jesus was faithful to me as I was to that last piece.

So even if I can't understand what he's doing here, I can trust him. So that's my hope is we may not always have the answers like I've claimed to have about this topic of slavery, but praise God that we can trust Jesus even when we don't have all the answers.

So let me pray. Heavenly Father, we thank you for your word tonight. And we pray that we can trust you even when we don't have all the technical answers to the questions that we're going to come up with, even in our daily Bible reading.

[ 32 : 26 ] But would you help us to never stop searching for your truth and loving in your seismic pride?