

QUESTIONS YOU HOPE THEY DON'T ASK

"Does the Bible Condone Slavery?"

(Genesis 1:1)

- Introduction:**
1. Throughout human history, some of the worst atrocities perpetuated on humans were connected to the institution of slavery.
 2. So, when we speak of God as being a just and holy God, some will ask the question, "Yeah, but doesn't the Bible condone slavery?"
 3. History records for us gruesome stories of slave ships, broken families, and cruel masters.
 4. This reached a tipping point in our nation's history in 1861.
 5. Slavery has become a sugar-stick for skeptics of Christianity.
 - a. "There is no reasonable doubt that the New Testament, like the Old, not only tolerated chattel slavery but helped to perpetuate it by making the slaves' obedience to their masters a religious duty. This biblical morality was one of the great handicaps that the emancipation movement in the United States had to overcome. The opponents of abolition had clear biblical evidence on their side when they argued" (What the Bible Really Says, Smith & Hoffman).
 6. So, we must ask the question, "Is it true that the Bible has been responsible for the oppression of slaves? Answer: No!

I. Slavery in Context

- A. Words have a way of evolving with usage and time.
 1. Nimrod – from "Mighty Hunter" to "an idiot."
 2. Gay – from "joyful" to "homosexual."
 3. Apology – from "a defense" to "being sorry."
 4. Slavery is no different. The 21st century concept of the word slavery is different from the biblical definition.
- B. We are called slaves of God (Romans 1:1; 6:15-23; Ephesians 6:6; 1 Peter 2:16).
- C. Thus there are forms of slavery that are not offensive and dehumanizing.

II. Slavery in the Old Testament

- A. Consider that not every action recorded in the Bible was approved, and some of God's legislation was regulatory, not ideal.
 1. Divorce (Matthew 19:3-10).
 2. (Acts 14:16; 17:30-31).
 3. One might find less than ideal treatment of slaves in the Old Testament, but that doesn't mean God approved.
- B. Some slavery is punitive, and justly so.

1. Consider a man who committed murder and is imprisoned for the rest of his life. Is that unjust? His freedom has been taken away. He may be forced to work, etc.
 2. He has become a "slave of the state," but rightly so.
 3. Remember, Israel was a "Theocracy" and God used them as an arm of his justice.
 4. The Canaanites were terrible people (Lev. 18:21,24), and God punished them through Israel.
 5. Thieves were made slaves to pay off what they stole (Exodus 22:1-3).
- C. Some slaves did not want freedom.
1. Abraham's slaves.
 - a. Eliezer – "one born in my house" (Genesis 15:2-3).
 - b. Ruled over all he had (Genesis 24:2).
 - c. Armed 318 of his servants (Genesis 14:14-15).
 2. Some slaves wanted to remain slaves (Deuteronomy 15:16-17).
- D. Some Old Testament facts about slavery.
1. Indentured Slavery – Jacob to Laban (Genesis 29:15-30).
 2. It was contractual – Ending every seven years (Exodus 21:1-6).
 3. Slave-trade was a capital offense (Exodus 21:16).
 4. Abuse was not tolerated (Exodus 21:26-27).
 5. Run-away slaves were not to be returned to their abusive masters (Deuteronomy 23:15).

III. Slavery in the New Testament

- A. As we approach the "slavery" passages of the New Testament, we must do so with an understanding of the morally permissible types of slavery we read about in the Old Testament.
- B. But what are we to make of Ephesians 6:5 and 1 Peter 2:8 that tell slaves to be submissive and obedient?
1. We must interpret those passages in the same way we would interpret Matthew 5: 39.
 2. Of course, there are limits.
 3. And the fact that Jesus gives these instructions does not mean he endorses the one initiating the harm.
- C. The New Testament explicitly condemns immoral slavery.
1. (1 Timothy 1:9-10) Slave trading.
 2. (Colossians 4:1) Masters were to deal justly with their slaves.
- D. Where the "Golden Rule" (Matthew 7:12) has been observed, unjust slavery has ended all over the world.

IV. Difficult Passages

- A. (Exodus 21:20).
 - 1. Slave owner could beat a slave to death?
 - 2. Remember, that slavery was often God's punishment for people who by his grace escaped capital punishment.
 - 3. These slaves could have forced the situation because of their mal content.
 - 4. The two- or three-day difference denotes an allowance for what must have been an unintentional death.
- B. (Leviticus 19:20-22).
 - 1. The reading in the KJV sounds like the slave woman shall be beaten, but the freeman would simply give an offering to the Lord.
 - 2. This is a translation issue. Read it in the NKJV, NASB, LSB, etc.

- Conclusion:**
- 1. Because of the evolution of language, to hear one speak of "moral slavery" or "just slavery" almost seems irreconcilable.
 - 2. Much like the word "gay" doesn't mean the same thing it meant 80 years ago, the word slave doesn't have the same connotation today that it had when the Bible was written.
 - 3. We are all slaves to someone (Romans 6:16-18), and our slavery to Jesus is not unjust, immoral, or oppressive.

Sources

A Lesson by Matthew Higginbotham entitled, "Does the Bible Teach Slavery." Preached at the Dayton, TN church of Christ, 2022.

An Article by Kyle Butt entitled, "The Bible and Slavery." Contained in "Reason and Revelation," Volume 25, Number 6.