

1 **The Bible, Christianity, and Slavery**

- Module: History
- Lesson 36

2 **Some Recommended Sources**

- Rodney Stark, How the West Won
- Paul Copan, Is God a Moral Monster?
- David Bentley Hart, Atheist Delusions
- Peter J. Leithart, Defending Constantine
- Aaron Menikoff, "How and Why Did Some Christians Defend Slavery?": <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/how-and-why-did-some-christians-defend-slavery/>
- For a better understanding of the cultures of the Old and New Testament eras.
 - Sandra Richter, The Epic of Eden
 - Jo Ann Shelton, As the Romans Did

3 **Understanding Slavery**

- Until Christianity, slavery has been practiced throughout human history in virtually all societies where one individual was able to produce more than just enough for survival.
- The subject of slavery and the Bible/Christianity is complex and nuanced.
- One cannot accurately or fairly assess the question of slavery and the Bible...
 - ...without an understanding of the historical and cultural contexts in question.
 - ...if one approaches the issue with an exclusively antebellum picture of slavery and its role in society.

4 **Slavery in The Old Testament**

- It is crucial to understand the vast difference between our modern culture and the culture of the Ancient Near East (ANE).
- The Hebrew word ebed:
 - Used nearly 1000 times in the O. T.
 - Only translated as "slave" in a small number of instances.
 - Does not have an inherently negative meaning.

5 **Slavery in The Old Testament**

- In the patriarchal era and in ancient Israel, slavery was more akin to indentured servanthood than to the chattel slavery of antebellum America.
 - It was a safety net for the poor and disadvantaged in a patriarchal/tribal culture.
 - It was frequently volitional, entered into to avoid extreme poverty, starvation, or cultural isolation.

- A patriarchal/tribal culture, such as in the ANE, had no other institutional mechanism to address severe poverty and starvation, or to accommodate people who had lost their connection to a patriarchal clan.

6 Slavery in The Old Testament

- What was owned, was not the person, per se, but the labor of the person. (Often for a set or limited time.)
- Consider a modern version of indentured servanthood:
 - Professional athletes typically sign a contract for a set period to provide their future labor and productivity to a sports franchise. They are not free to provide their athletic labors to anyone they wish (until they become free agents).
 - We accept the concept of such indentured servanthood in such cases today because of the lucrative nature of the labor involved. But for someone facing starvation in the ANE, why wouldn't indentured servanthood be even more justifiable?
- Not all slavery in the ANE was of the indentured servanthood type. There were many cases of chattel slavery, such as Israel in Egypt.

7 Mosaic Law and Slavery

- Kidnapping was prohibited, on penalty of death.
- Slaves were to be treated as persons, not as farm implements or property.
- In most cases (all Hebrews) slaves were to be released in the sabbatical year (every 7 yrs.).
- Runaway slaves from foreign nations were to be granted freedom.
- Servitude resulting from conquest:
 - The servitude applied to the whole society, which was left intact. (e. g. the Gibeonites, Joshua 9)
 - If the society itself was destroyed, then women and children were granted security by the conquering Israelites within the patriarchal system (as slaves).

8 Slavery and the Early Christians

- Greco-Roman slavery:
 - Slavery in the pagan world was chattel in nature, a far cry from Mosaic standards.
 - It was pervasive throughout the culture and the world. (50-90% of the city of Rome were slaves.)
 - A number of violent slave revolts had occurred in the centuries around the N. T. era, accompanied by horrifically brutal suppression of those revolts by the Romans.
 - European slavery gradually came to an end in the mid Middle Ages, largely because of Christian influence.
 - Slaves were extended the sacraments, which confirmed their status as equal with non-slaves.
 - Enslavement of Christians (and Jews) was made illegal, thus virtually abolishing slavery throughout

- European slavery was virtually nonexistent for nearly 1000 years due in large part to Christian influence. (Serfdom was not slavery.)

9 **The New Testament on Slaves**

- The Apostle Paul Did Not Overtly Challenge the Institution of Slavery.
 - It would have been unrealistic to call for the immediate overthrow of such an entrenched element of the social structure.
 - Consider what would have happened to the comparatively small Christian community if it had been perceived by Rome to be an element of, or to be encouraging, a slave revolt.
 - Rome had very strict restrictions of manumissions, making any general call to Christians to free their slaves a perceived direct threat on Rome.
 - Even by Constantine's day (the first Christian emperor), abolition was not a viable option, given economic and social obstacles.

10 **The New Testament on Slaves**

- The New Testament Teaching On Slaves.
 - Kidnapping was prohibited.
 - Threatening (and hence abuse) was prohibited.
 - The holy kiss was extended to slaves.
 - In Christ there was no distinction between slave and freeman.

11 **The New Testament on Slaves**

- The important case of Onesimus and Philemon. (Philemon 1:10-21)
 - A runaway slave whom Paul introduced to Christ.
 - Sent back "no longer as a slave but as a brother."
 - To be received, in Christ, as equal to Paul.
 - Note: Though Paul does not directly challenge the institution of slavery, the status of slaves in the church is elevated to equality with its most honored members.
 - Note: Paul's letter to Philemon re: Onesimus is circulated with Paul's other letters, presumably with Philemon's consent, and is regarded by the church as canonical.
 - Note: Paul anticipates Philemon's "obedience" (v. 21), thus implying that Paul is doing more than making a request, but is actually gently giving a command.

12 **Slavery in Church History**

- Slavery as a Social Institution:
 - Christianity did not introduce slavery to the West.

- Slavery had existed in all cultures since time immemorial.
- To suggest slavery could and should be suddenly abolished was unthinkable.

13 **Slavery in Church History**

- Two crucial concepts which served as an impetus to Christian opposition to slavery:
 - The concept of human free will.
 - The concept of the imago dei.
- Preaching against slavery:
 - From the beginning the church preached against abuses of slaves.
 - Eventually, against holding Christians and Jews as slaves.
 - Finally against the institution of slavery itself:
 - The first record of such preaching was by Gregory of Nyssa for Lent and Easter, 379 A. D.

14 **Slavery in the Christian West**

- Christianity accomplished the demise of slavery in Western civilization by the 10th to 11th century.
- Slavery experienced a resurgence with the colonization of the New World.
 - The European church vigorously opposed it.
 - The colonies were too far removed for the church to have any success in countering the resurgence.
 - Church authorities in the New World who did oppose it were persecuted or run off.

15 **Christian Justification of Slavery**

- Christians in the Antebellum South argued in support of slavery on biblical grounds.
- What were their chief arguments?
 - The Old Testament tolerates and regulates slavery, which it never would have done had slavery been wrong.
 - The New Testament tolerates and regulates slavery, which it never would have done had slavery been wrong.
 - If Jesus or Paul considered slavery wrong, they would have called for its immediate abolition.
 - The morality of slavery is no justification for its abuses.

16 **Refuting the Use of the Bible to Justify Slavery**

- Attempts to justify slavery from the bible were rooted in a flawed hermeneutic and racism.
- Though God tolerated and regulated slavery, he has in the past tolerated and regulated other human behavior of which he clearly disapproved.
 - Divorce: God clearly states he hates divorce (Mal. 2:16), yet he permits it because of the hardness of human hearts, though it violates his creational intent. (Matt. 19:8).

- Polygamy: God's instructions re: marriage in Genesis (Gen. 2:24) as well the teachings of Jesus (Matt. 19:9) and Paul (1 Tim. 3:2) clearly indicate that polygamy was outside of God's plan, yet God permitted and regulated it.
- Slavery under the Mosaic law was not a parallel to the chattel slavery of Antebellum America. It was more equivalent to indentured servanthood. (See slides 6-9)
- The Mosaic Law prohibited kidnapping as a capital offense. Chattel slavery in Antebellum America was based on the practice of kidnapping.

17 **Refuting the Use of the Bible to Justify Slavery**

- The teachings of Jesus to love one's neighbor as oneself, and to do unto others as you would have them do to you, are impossible to obey while using one's power to enslave another.
- The New Testament teachings on the dignity of all humans (the Imago Dei), free will, the oneness of the Church, and the full inclusion of slaves in all the fellowship, functions, and offices of the church obviates the practice of slavery and eradicates its racial justification. Historically, the church has predominantly understood this.
- Paul's letter to Philemon, eventually circulated throughout the churches, anticipates Philemon's "obedience" (v. 21) implying that Paul's "request" was in reality a gentle command.
- For the early church to openly denounce slavery and call for the manumission of slaves would have been interpreted by Rome as encouraging a slave revolt and would have resulted in a crushing response from Rome as it did in other slave revolts.

18 **The Church's Failure re: Slavery**

- Some segments of Christianity did condone and support slavery. (Most notably, for us, our own Southern Baptist Convention.)
- Historically, however, this is an aberration from the general Christian response to slavery.
- At times, Protestants were less inclined to protect slaves and resist slavery than was Catholicism. On the other hand, the anti-slave-trade crusade in Britain and the abolitionist movement in America were heavily Protestant.
- Finally, and very importantly, it has been indigenous Christian opposition which has accomplished the abolition of slavery in Europe and the New World, not once, but twice!

19 **Next Week:**

- The Church's Early Years