

## Christians and slavery

**Wikipedia states that Slavery** is any system in which principles of property law are applied to people, allowing individuals to own, buy and sell other individuals.

**The oxford dictionary** defines slavery as:

- 1) a person who is the legal property of another and is forced to obey them.
- 2) A person who works very hard without proper remuneration or appreciation.

**Some synonyms of slavery:** enslavement, servitude, subjugation, captivity

Now the Bible is strangely quiet on the topic of the abolishment of slavery. In fact it almost seems to condone it. So what should the Christian view of slavery be?

Colossians 3: 22 – 4: 1

### 1) A background of slavery

- Slavery is basically as old as sinful humanity and predates written records thereof.
- It was never restricted to any particular part of the world or to any particular culture.
- It was known in almost every ancient civilisation including China, India, Assyria, Greece, the Roman Empire, Egypt, and Israel.
- It was rife during the colonial period where colonialists relied on slavery to build their empires.
- Some of the factors that led to the development of the slave trade:
  - Colonisation
  - The shortage of labour
  - The failure to find alternative sources of labour
  - Racial attitudes
  - Religious factors
  - Military factors
- Slavery never ceased and although slavery has officially been made illegal in most countries in the world it is still rife in various forms
  - Human trafficking
  - Sex slavery
  - Child labour
  - Forced labour
  - Bonded labour – debt bondage
  - Domestic servitude
- The negative effects of slavery still abound and lists can be made. Overall it has caused much pain and the psychological effects are being carried out to this day.

### 2) Slavery in the Old Testament

- Slavery is a theme that permeates the scriptures especially focusing on the enslavement of the nation of Israel in Egypt for four hundred years and their deliverance therefrom.
- Slavery was first mentioned when Noah cursed Canaan saying that he will be the lowest of slaves to his brothers. (Genesis 9: 24 – 25)
- Abimelech, the king of Gerar, owned slaves and gave slaves to Abraham. (Genesis 20: 14)
- Israelites priests had slaves (Leviticus 22: 11)
- Slaves were to be bought from other nations but Israelites weren't to be slaves. (Leviticus 25: 39 – 46)
- The Israelite kings had slaves and Solomon built the temple and his palace with slave labour. (1 Kings 9: 15)
- Solomon's attitude towards slaves can be seen in Proverbs 19: 10 where slaves are likened to fools: It is not fitting for a fool to live in luxury—how much worse for a slave to rule over princes!
- The Assyrians and Babylonians invaded Israel and Judah and took them into captivity where they lived as slaves for 70 years.
- Hence we can see that slavery was an accepted practice in the Old Testament times but also brought about much pain and suffering.
- Exodus 3: 7 – 8 The Lord said, "I have indeed seen the misery of my people in Egypt. I have heard them crying out because of their slave drivers, and I am concerned about their suffering. So I have come down to rescue them from the hand of the Egyptians.

### 3) The Christian and slavery

- So what is the Christian attitude towards slavery?
- The New Testament is conspicuously silent on condemning slavery.
- Our text focuses on the relationship between slaves and masters but slavery is never condemned.
- So does this mean that we should just accept slavery and make sure that slaves always obey their masters and that Christian masters should just treat their slaves well?
- It is unfortunate that many Christians, and in fact the church, has often used this text to condone slavery.
- What we need to do is ask ourselves what the nature of God is and how He views slavery.
- Slavery is oppressive
  - Isaiah 58: 9 & 10 "If you do away with the yoke of oppression, with the pointing finger and malicious talk, and if you spend yourselves in behalf of the hungry and satisfy the needs of the oppressed, then your light will rise in the darkness, and your night will become like the noonday.
- Slavery is bondage – God is a God of freedom
  - Isaiah 61: 1 The Spirit of the Sovereign Lord is on me, because the Lord has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners.
- Slavery exists for personal gain – we have died with Christ and it is no longer us who live.
  - Habakkuk 2: 4 – 5 "See, the enemy is puffed up; his desires are not upright—but the righteous person will live by his faithfulness—indeed, wine betrays him; he is arrogant and never at rest. Because he is as greedy as the grave and like death is never satisfied, he gathers to himself all the nations and takes captive all the peoples.
- Slavery brings pain and misery - God is a God of comfort and joy
  - 2 Corinthians 1: 3 – 4 Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves receive from God.
- Slavery isn't based on love for the slave as a person
  - 1 John 3: 14 We know that we have passed from death to life, because we love each other. Anyone who does not love remains in death.
- John Newton – former slave trader – said:

"If the trade is at present carried on to the same extent and nearly in the same manner, while we are delaying from year to year to put a stop to our part in it, **the blood of many thousands of our helpless, much injured fellow creatures is crying against us.** The pitiable state of the survivors who are torn from their relatives, connections, and their native land must be taken into account. I fear the African trade is a national sin, for the enormities which accompany it are now generally known; and though, perhaps, the greater part of the nation would be pleased if it were suppressed, yet, as it does not immediately affect their own interest, they are passive. [...] Can we wonder that the calamities of the present war begin to be felt at home, when we ourselves wilfully and deliberately inflict much greater calamities upon the native Africans, who never offended us?. "*Woe unto thee that spoilest, and thou wast not spoiled when thou shalt cease to spoil, thou shalt be spoiled*"