

Biblical Slaves

Jesus said, "I no longer call you slaves for the slave does not know what his master does, but I have called you friends, for everything I have heard from My Father, I have made known to you" (John 15:15).

Slavery was tolerated during the period the Bible was written but it was not the ideal and was not condoned by God. God understood the children of Israel needed people to help work their land and they were able to have a workforce who were labelled as slaves, but they were not treated as slaves, as we know slavery. They were treated similar to the way employers treat their employees or staff in our modern era. The difference being, the ancient 'bosses' provided everything the staff needed such as accommodation, food and clothing because they were not paid wages, although they were sometimes given farm animals. Employers in our day pay monetary wages and do not usually provide homes for their staff. It was a command of God, the slaves who worked for Jewish people were to be made comfortable, they became part of the extended family and had to be treated very well, generation after generation. The Bible makes it very clear, a slave was a human being and was thus to be treated with dignity. A person could give themselves to a wealthy landowner as a servant for a time if they were poor, enabling them to be housed and fed, but Jews were not permitted to take other Jews as slaves by force. They were however, allowed to have Gentiles as slaves or servants. "If your brother (a fellow Jew) has grown poor among you and sells himself to you, you will not make him serve as a slave but as a hired servant, or as a sojourner he will be with you. He will serve with you until the Year of Jubilee then he will go out from you, he and his children with him, and will return to his own family and to the possession of his fathers. They (the Jewish people) are My servants whom I brought out of the land of Egypt so they will not be sold as slaves. You will not rule over them with harshness, but you will fear your God. As for your male and your female slaves whom you may have of the nations around you, from them you may buy male and female slaves. Of the children of the strangers who sojourn among you, of them you may buy and of their families who are with you, born in your land and they will be your 'property'. You may make them an inheritance for your children after you. Of them may you take your slaves, but over your brothers, the children of Israel, you will not rule one over another with harshness" (Leviticus 25:39 to 46).

When we read the above verses, we can see the word 'slave' describing workers of the Jewish people is misused. They were workers, not prisoners. Slaves were more like employees and were part of the family they worked for and were not a mere possession. As 'property' they were expected to serve their masters for a set time, agreed to by both parties like Jacob and Laban (Genesis 29:15). After the agreement was made, Jacob could not leave until he had served Laban for the stipulated time. Jewish servants were expected to honour their commitment before they left their employer. Loyal slaves could inherit the family fortune. Abraham had a servant named Eliezer who had been born while his parents were working for Abraham and was thus entitled to inherit everything Abraham owned. Abraham thought Eliezer would inherit his wealth when he died but the Lord told Abraham a yet unborn son would inherit everything. Abram said, "Lord God, what will you give me seeing I go childless and he who will inherit my estate is Eliezer of Damascus? Behold, You have given me no children and one born in my house is my heir." The word of the Lord came to Abram saying, "This man will not be your heir, but he who will come from your own body will be your heir" (Genesis 15:2 to 4). Once we are born-again and walk closely with God, we are joined with Him in one, worldwide Body of Believers and heirs of the promise made to Abraham. 'There is neither Jew nor Gentile, slave nor free man, male nor female, for you are all one in Jesus. If you belong to Jesus, then you are Abraham's offspring and heirs according to the promise' (Galatians 3:28 & 29).

Tragically, slavery was part of life for many people in the Gentile world. Some Jews were forced into slavery but of course that brought judgement on the people who did that. "The tree of the field will yield its fruit and the earth will yield its increase. They (the Jewish people) will be secure in their land and they will know I am the Lord when I have broken the bars of their yoke and have delivered them out of the hand of those who made slaves of them" (Ezekiel 34:27). The slaves in the barbaric Gentile world were treated with insane cruelty and sadly, are still treated that way in countries where illegal slavery still exists, being no more than prisoners. In some nations, escaped slaves were returned to their masters even in areas where slavery was illegal. This was because a slave was considered to be the property of the master and it was an obligation to return lost property. Biblical slavery was not about slavery as we know it. There is a vast difference between Biblical slavery and Gentile slavery. In Jewish law, a slave was able to leave if he wanted to go and live with his family. No master had the right to force a slave to live where he did not want to go. If they left, they were to be allowed to go free. 'You will not deliver a slave to his master who has escaped from his master to you, but he will dwell with you in the midst of you, in the place which he will choose within one of your gates,

where it pleases him best. You will not oppress him' (Deuteronomy 23:15 & 16). 'Masters, give to your servants what is just and equal, knowing you also have a Master in heaven' (Colossians 4:1).

"Paul, a prisoner of Jesus, to Philemon, our beloved fellow worker ... Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus ... I thank my God always, making mention of you in my prayers, hearing of your love and of the faith which you have toward the Lord Jesus and toward all the saints. May the fellowship of your faith become effective in the knowledge of every good thing which is in us in Jesus. We have much joy and comfort in your love because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you, brother Philemon. Therefore, though I have all boldness in Jesus to command you which is appropriate, yet for love's sake I rather beg, being such a one as Paul the Aged, but also a prisoner of Jesus. I beg you for my child in the faith, whom I have become the father of in my chains, Onesimus, who was once useless to you, but now is useful to you and to me. I am sending him back to you, so you might receive him, that is, my own heart, whom I desired to keep with me so on your behalf he might serve me in my chains for the Gospel. I was willing to do nothing without your consent so your goodness would not be as of necessity, but of free will. Perhaps he was separated from you for a while so you would have him forever, no longer as a slave, but more than a slave, a beloved brother, especially to me, but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord. If you count me a partner, receive him as you would receive me. If he has wronged you at all, or owes you anything, put that to my account. I Paul, write this with my own hand. I will repay it; besides, not to mention to you that you owe to me even your own soul. Yes brother, let me have joy from you in the Lord. Refresh my heart in the Lord. Having confidence in your obedience, I write to you, knowing you will do beyond what I say. Also, prepare a guest room for me for I hope that through your prayers, I will be restored to you ... The grace of our Lord Jesus be with your spirit. Amen" (Philemon 1:1 to 25).

The story of Onesimus is about a Jewish slave who escaped from his master Philemon. Onesimus somehow became involved with Apostle Paul and gave his life to Jesus. Before his conversion, Onesimus seemed to be a somewhat difficult, perhaps lazy slave. Paul described him as being useless. After Onesimus gave his life to Jesus, he became a dedicated servant, helping Paul while he was in prison in Rome. Paul wrote this very diplomatic and somewhat subservient, almost grovelling letter to Philemon, telling him he was returning Onesimus to him but then almost ordered Philemon to set Onesimus free to serve the Lord because he was, after his conversion, very useful in the service of the Lord and a close brother in the faith. Philemon seemed to owe Paul a favour and Paul was now ready to collect. Towards the end of the letter, we can detect tension between Paul and Philemon. Perhaps Philemon was one of the men who had once refused to accept Paul because of the way he had once persecuted believers in Jesus. That is inferred when Paul writes, "If you count me as a partner." Then Paul tells Philemon to prepare a room for him to stay. The outcome of that letter allowed Onesimus to go free to help Paul who was in prison and needed someone to help him. Onesimus, once the 'useless' slave, became a strong man of God, a trusted, 'faithful and beloved brother'. Paul wrote to the Colossian church, "All my affairs will be made known to you by Tychicus the beloved brother, faithful servant and fellow servant in the Lord. I am sending him to you for this very purpose, so he may know your circumstances and comfort your hearts, together with Onesimus, the faithful and beloved brother, who is one of you. They will make known to you everything going on here" (Colossians 4:7 to 9).

For many centuries, good people who did not believe in slavery would sometimes smuggle slaves away to safety. Brave men fought to have slavery abolished. We can only imagine how many lives could have been saved if slavery had been abolished centuries earlier than it was. Any slavery happening around the world today is illegal and in some countries, slave traders are shot. The Bible goes even further, stating slave traders are so offensive to God, they are included in His list of the worst kind of undesirables. 'We know the law is good if a man uses it lawfully. Laws were 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 sound doctrine according to the Gospel of the glory of the blessed Lord' (1 Timothy 1:8 to 10). Clearly, slavery is not condoned by the Lord. Slave traders are setting themselves up for harsh judgement on Judgement Day.

People on earth today who do not know Jesus may not be physical slaves but they are spiritual slaves. Jesus said, "Most certainly I tell you, everyone who commits sin is the slave of sin" (John 8:34). When the children of Israel left Egypt, they were away from slavery but were not free from slave traders (the Egyptians) until they went through the 'baptismal' waters of the Red Sea. Only then, could they begin to walk in their new, free lives. 'Our forefathers were all under the cloud and all passed through the Red Sea and were all baptised in the cloud and in the Red Sea' (1 Corinthians 10:1 & 2). When we accept Jesus, we are removed from the devil, the slave trader, but are not totally free until we are baptised in water by full immersion, and

only then are we set free from slavery and can walk in our new, free lives and can look forward to the resurrection. 'We were buried with Jesus through baptism to death, so just like Jesus was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, so we might walk in newness of life. If we have become united with Him in the likeness of His death, we will also be part of His resurrection. Our old self was crucified with Him and the body of sin was done away with so we would no longer be slaves to sin' (Romans 6:4 to 6). For those people who think baptism is unimportant, reading these verses should make them realise if there is no baptism, there can be no resurrection to new life.

'Thanks be to God, you were once slaves of sin but you became obedient from the heart to true teaching and you were delivered, being made free from sin you became servants of righteousness ... Being made free from sin and having become servants of God, you have your fruit of sanctification and the result of eternal life' (Romans 6:17, 18 & 22). When we work for an employee, the Lord expects us to work hard and be aware, He is watching us even if the boss is not. 'Servants (employees), be obedient to those who according to the flesh are your masters (employers) with fear and trembling, in singleness of heart as though you are working for Jesus. Not only when eyes are on you, but as servants of Jesus, doing the will of God from the heart' (Ephesians 6:5 & 6). The Lord wants loyal servants to work for Him. The Biblical description of slaves who were to be treated well by the Jewish people and who could inherit great wealth, is a 'picture' of God's servants being treated well, who will inherit the promises spoken to Abraham because all genuine believers in Jesus are Abraham's spiritual offspring. 'If you belong to Jesus, then you are Abraham's offspring and heirs according to the promise' (Galatians 3:29). 'A voice came from the Throne saying, "Give praise to our God all you His servants, you who fear Him, the small and the great!" ... The Throne of God and the Lamb will be in the New Jerusalem and His servants will serve Him' (Revelation 19:5; 22:3).

Amen and God bless you.

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