

## **TOUGH QUESTIONS...** **...from the Old Testament**

### **What Ever Happened to Equal Rights?**

In the middle of the eighteenth century, Christians became increasingly concerned about the slave trade. They amassed information on the inhumane treatment of the slaves and believed that eventually they could generate sufficient public support to overcome the slave trade interests in Parliament. But they needed political leadership.

William Wilberforce was elected to Parliament in 1780. He was converted in 1785, in part as a result of the ministry of John Newton, once a slave trader and then a clergyman in the Church of England. Newton and others (including evangelists George Whitefield and John and Charles Wesley) urged Wilberforce to investigate the slave trade and to consider whether he could fight for its abolition in Parliament. Wilberforce concluded, "So enormous, so dreadful, so irremediable did its wickedness appear that my own mind was completely made up for the abolition. A trade founded in iniquity and carried on as this was must be abolished."

His effort took 20 years. He was vigorously opposed by the slave traders, who had powerful allies in Parliament. There was also resistance because this was a moral battle: "Things have come to a pretty pass when religion is allowed to invade public life," complained Lord Melbourne. But with the help of Christians throughout England, Wilberforce eventually succeeded, and Parliament finally voted to abolish the slave trade.<sup>1</sup>

The date? It was February 23, 1807. And it was on February 23, 2007 that the movie, *Amazing Grace*, recounting Wilberforce's heroic efforts was released in theaters throughout the world.

Wilberforce (as well as many like him down through the centuries) was motivated to such compassion for the oppressed because of his deep belief in the Bible, God's Word. Amazingly, however, that same Bible has been used by others to oppress fellow humans, whether women, children, the poor, or those of another race. Take, for instance, this area of slavery. Jefferson Davis, President of the Confederate States, once said this:

"It [slavery] was established by decree of Almighty God...it is sanctioned in the Bible, in both Testaments, from Genesis to Revelation...it has existed in all ages, has been found among the people of the highest civilization, and in nations of the highest proficiency in the arts." Jefferson Davis<sup>ii</sup>

We obviously don't have time this morning to deal with all the Bible has to say about this vast topic of equality, and what the Bible *really* says about the immense value of each human life, irrespective of age, race, gender or nationality. So I have decided to focus this morning on just one issue that seems to be somewhat representative of the others: the topic of slavery. After all, in any culture and in any age, the slave has been viewed as the lowest of the low in the pecking order of society. If it can be demonstrated that the God of the Old Testament values the slave as He does anyone, then it follows that others who are often discriminated against should not be, for each human is of equal value in the eyes of God.

I would ask you to turn with me to Exodus 21, where we find the greatest number of laws in the Old Testament relating not only to slaves, but also to women, the unborn and the alien. And as I read some selected verses from this chapter, I want you to notice what two letter word is repeated again and again.

<sup>1</sup> “These are the laws you are to set before them: <sup>2</sup> “If you buy a Hebrew servant, he is to serve you for six years. But in the seventh year, he shall go free, without paying anything.

<sup>5</sup> “But if the servant declares, ‘I love my master and my wife and children and do not want to go free,’ <sup>6</sup> then his master must take him before the judges. He shall take him to the door or the doorpost and pierce his ear with an awl. Then he will be his servant for life.

<sup>7</sup> “If a man sells his daughter as a servant, she is not to go free as menservants do. <sup>8</sup> If she does not please the master who has selected her for himself, he must let her be redeemed. He has no right to sell her to foreigners, because he has broken faith with her. <sup>9</sup> If he selects her for his son, he must grant her the rights of a daughter. <sup>10</sup> If he marries another woman, he must not deprive the first one of her food, clothing and marital rights. <sup>11</sup> If he does not provide her with these three things, she is to go free, without any payment of money.

<sup>12</sup> “Anyone who strikes a man and kills him shall surely be put to death.

<sup>20</sup> “If a man beats his male or female slave with a rod and the slave dies as a direct result, he must be punished, <sup>21</sup> but he is not to be punished if the slave gets up after a day or two, since the slave is his property.

<sup>26</sup> “If a man hits a manservant or maidservant in the eye and destroys it, he must let the servant go free to compensate for the eye. <sup>27</sup> And if he knocks out the tooth of a manservant or maidservant, he must let the servant go free to compensate for the tooth.

Before dealing specifically with any one verse, let me make a couple of general observations. First, these laws, which follow on the heels of the Ten Commandments of chapter 20, are addressing *specific situations of life as it is*. Throughout this series on *Tough Questions*, we have emphasized that the Bible deals with *life as it is*. It doesn't sugar-coat it or speak about life in idealistic terms.

This is seen in the little two-letter word that is repeated throughout these verses. What is that word? It's the word “if.” This little (but on the other hand very big word) “if” describes life *as it often is* in a fallen world. In this realistic world there are accidents, such as a bull goring a man or woman to death (verse 28). And in this world there are quarrels, as when two men fight each other (verse 18). While the Ten Commandments deal with the “big picture,” giving laws that apply to all of life, the commands of Exodus 21 deal with specific situations that are often less than the ideal. One of those situations that is less than the ideal is a very humane form of slavery that was tolerated and strictly controlled in the Old Testament.

Secondly, all of these laws in this chapter (as elsewhere in the Old Testament) place a high value on the dignity of human life. Offences against *life* and *family* are punished severely according to

biblical law. In striking contrast to this, Babylonian law at this time placed the most severe punishments on such things as breaking and entering or looting at a fire and theft. But in Israel, the punishment of such crimes is quite mild compared to oriental standards. Even today, we see just how mixed up some of our values are. If a man steals another man's physical property, he experiences the harsh consequences of the law. But if he steals another man's wife, and robs the children of their mother, we think nothing of it.<sup>iii</sup>

Now, let me deal more specifically with this question of slavery, for in some ways slavery serves as an illustrative "proto-type" of other areas of discrimination and devaluing human life.

Slavery in Israel was quite different from what comes to our minds when we think of slavery. We think of oppressive labor on southern plantations or, especially today, the inhumane treatment of sex slaves. While a form of slavery is tolerated in the Old Testament, it was only with strict regulations that govern its practice. In the Old Testament, there is little difference between the treatment of a slave and a hired hand.<sup>iv</sup>

We see this in Exodus 21, where we find strict regulations that govern the practice of slavery and protect the slave and his rights. Let's look at two verses in particular.

If a man beats his male or female slave with a rod and the slave dies as a direct result, **he must be punished**, but he is not to be punished if the slave gets up after a day or two, since the slave is his property. Exodus 21:20-21

Notice the result of a man beating his male or female slave to death: "he must be punished." The expression literally means, "he shall suffer vengeance," which in other passages of the Old Testament refers to the death penalty.<sup>v</sup> This is in keeping with the principle of verse 12 of this same chapter: "Anyone who strikes a man and kills him shall surely be put to death." And by the way, the same holds true for the oppression of the widow and orphan.

Do not take advantage of a widow or an orphan. If you do and they cry out to me, I will certainly hear their cry. My anger will be aroused, and I will kill you with the sword.  
Exodus 22:22-24

The principle is this: God defends those who have little or no legal representation. It is likely that the slave mentioned in these verses is not even a Hebrew slave (one who has sold himself due to indebtedness) but what is called a "chattel slave" (one taken as a prisoner of war from a foreign country) with no one to represent his case.<sup>vi</sup>

But then why does the verse say, "but he is *not to be punished* if the slave gets up after a day or two?" That sounds really unfair to me! You mean you can beat a slave, and just because he gets up a couple of days later and can hobble around the room, the master of the slave gets off scot-free?

Remember that the word "punish" in this context means "execution." So if a master beats his slave, but the slave doesn't die, the master is *not* to be put to death (as in verse 20). What then is to happen? The answer is in the phrase, "since the slave is his property."

Remember one of the principles we laid down in our first message in this series? It was this: *A text taken out of context is a pretext.* One reason that certain passages from the Bible, and particularly the Old Testament, have been used as a pretext for wrong is because of ignoring this very principle. What then is the context of this text and particularly the phrase, “the slave is his property?”

The context is found first in verses 18-19 and then in verses 26-27.

If men quarrel and one hits the other with a stone or with his fist and he does not die but is confined to bed, the one who struck the blow will not be held responsible if the other gets up and walks around outside with his staff; however, *he must pay the injured man for the loss of his time and see that he is completely healed.* Exodus 21:18-19<sup>vii</sup>

These surrounding verses indicate that when Moses says, “Since the slave is his *property*,” he means: “Since the slave is his *responsibility*.” Literally, the phrase can be translated, “Since the slave is his *money*.”<sup>viii</sup> Just as with the injured man in verse 19, the master must pay for the loss of time and see that he is completely healed. Or, if you knock out a tooth or an eye, you have to free the slave entirely! That’s found in verses 26-27:

If a man hits a manservant or maidservant [or as in the NASB “male or female slave] in the eye and destroys it, he must let the servant go free to compensate for the eye. And if he knocks out the tooth of a manservant or maidservant, he must let the servant go free to compensate for the tooth. Exodus 21:26-27

Given the surrounding context, Moses is saying this:

If a man has a chattel slave (one from a foreign country taken as war plunder), and he beats him so that he dies, the master is also to die. However, if the slave gets up after a day or two, the master is not to be punished by death. However, he *is* to pay for the injured slave and nurture him back to health. And if in the process the slave losses an eye or tooth (or for that matter, any other bodily part), he is to be set free.

My obvious purpose in looking in depth at this passage is *not* to review slavery laws of the Old Testament. My intent is to show the value that God places on *all* human life by viewing his laws protecting those who were often considered the “lowest of the low,” the foreign slave taken in battle.<sup>ix</sup>

All human beings participate in the *imago Dei*, the image of God in humankind (Genesis 1:27).<sup>x</sup> According to the Bible, common ancestry means racial unity. And racial unity should exclude racial prejudice.<sup>xi</sup> If all humankind is created in the image of God, there can be no superior or inferior race of people.<sup>xii</sup> To hurt another human being is to degrade the image of God in man. That’s why the Bible consistently defends the helpless:

Do not deprive the alien or the fatherless of justice, or take the cloak of the widow as a pledge. Deuteronomy 24:17

Cursed is the man who withholds justice from the alien, the fatherless or the widow.”  
Deuteronomy 27:19

I know that the LORD secures justice for the poor and upholds the cause of the needy.  
Psalm 140:12

When we come to the New Testament, we see that it strictly condemns the evil system of this world that trades the “bodies and souls of men” (Rev. 18:13).<sup>xiii</sup> In fact, such slave trade becomes the object of God’s final judgment of this world.

Rev. 18:11-13 The merchants of the earth will weep and mourn over her because no one buys their cargoes any more— cargoes of gold, silver, precious stones and pearls ... *and bodies and souls of men.*

You may be tempted to think that such a message has little or no relevance to us today. Let me share with you some alarming realities.

- Today, 27,000,000 people are still oppressed as slaves all over the world in Africa, Asia, South America, Europe, and North America.
- UNICEF estimates that 200,000 children are sold into slavery each year from West Africa.
- As many as 50,000 women and children are victims of human trafficking in the United States every year.

The last letter ever written by John Wesley on February 24, 1791, was written to Wilberforce. Here’s what Wesley said:

O be not weary of well doing! Go on, in the name of God and in the power of His might, till even American slavery (the vilest that ever saw the sun) shall vanish away before it...

That He who has guided you from youth up may continue to strengthen you in this and all things...

Your affectionate servant, John Wesley.<sup>xiv</sup>

May we also, go in the name of God and in the power of His might, not to reform society, but to be God’s salt and light *in* society, caring as Jesus does for the oppressed and needy.

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<sup>i</sup> Adapted from Daniel W. Van Ness, “Saving a Sinking Society,” *Discipleship Journal* (Mar/Apr 1988) as cited by [www.preachingtoday.com](http://www.preachingtoday.com).

<sup>ii</sup> C. Dennis McKinsey, *The Encyclopedia of Biblical Errancy* (New York: Prometheus Books, 1995), 206. .

<sup>iii</sup> John W. Wenham, *The Enigma of Evil* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1985), 109. Hebrew law is very severe as it pertains to (1) religious offences (idolatry and blasphemy); (2) sexual offences (adultery and homosexuality); and (3) juvenile incorrigibility. All of these required the death penalty. The Bible also does away with another form of punishment that was quite common in the Ancient Near East: substitutionary punishment. For example, if a house collapses and kills the eldest son of the family, the son of the man who built the house must be put to death. Deuteronomy 24:16 says: “Fathers shall not be put to death for their children, nor children put to death for their fathers; each is to die for his own sin.”

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<sup>iv</sup> Gregory C. Chirichigno, *Debt-Slavery in Israel and the Ancient Near East* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993), 140-41. Slavery as described in the Bible was a cultural and social phenomenon. Slavery was *tolerated* in both the Old Testament and the New Testament, but it was an extremely humane form of slavery. The Old Testament refrains from condemning slavery, but on the other hand it doesn't condone its abuse. It most often places it in the big "if" category, defining society—even the society of Israel—as *it is*. However, it does offer strict guidelines intended to improve the condition of all slaves and constantly reminds slave owners of their responsibility before God. The characteristics of slavery as defined by the Old Testament can be summarized by the following: (1) Hebrew servitude was voluntary: a person could offer himself to become a servant as a security against poverty (Ex. 21:2-6; Lev. 25:39-43; Deut. 15:12); (2) Hebrew slavery, then, was basically a benevolent institution, a kindness shown to the poor or oppressed (Ex. 21:20-21, 26-27; 22:21; 23:9; Lev. 19:18; Deut. 27:19); (3) A slave could be redeemed at any time by a next of kin who put up money for him (Lev. 25:47-52); (4) In the seventh year, the sabbatical, and in the jubilee year all slaves were to be automatically freed. However, a slave could decide to stay under the direction of his master (Ex. 21:2-6; Lev. 25:10); (5) Slaves who were circumcised could take full part in all the privileges of the religious life of Israel, including the many vacation days of the religious calendar (Ex 20:10; 23:12; 12:44; Lev. 25:4-6; Deut. 12:11-12); (6) Slaves were instructed in morality and religion with full and equal membership in the believing community (Gen. 17:12; Deut. 16:9-14; 31:10-13); (7) The law required that runaway slaves *not* be returned to their masters; they were legally protected from oppressive masters (Deut. 23:15-16).

<sup>v</sup> Chirichigno, 162.

<sup>vi</sup> In the Old Testament, there were basically two kinds and principle sources of slaves. In *times of peace*, there were "debt slaves." Debt-slaves are those who were hard-pressed to pay back their loans. Due to the burden of taxation and the growing monopoly of the landowning elite in Israel, many landowners were forced into taking loans that came with high interest rates. Because of this, small farmers and landowners were forced to sell their land or else give themselves and their dependents into "debt-slavery." On the other hand, *in times of war*, there were "chattel slaves." These were essentially prisoners of war taken from the surrounding nations

<sup>vii</sup> Notice the similarities:

- Two men are quarreling (18) || A master and his slave are quarreling (20)
- The one who is struck does not die but gets up (19) || the slave does not die but gets up (21)

<sup>viii</sup> Chirichigno, 176. It is clear that these foreign slaves were the property of their owners. However, in the Laws of Hammurabi, that reflect the values of the surrounding nations, little concern is shown for the welfare of the slave. In contrast, the majority of the biblical laws demand that owners show concern for the welfare of the slave. Such slaves were allowed to participate in many of the religious observances of the Israelites (Ex 20:10, 17; Deut 5:14, 21; Lev. 25:6; Deut 12:12, 18; 16:11).

<sup>ix</sup> Larry A. Mercer, "A Biblical and Cultural Study of the Problem of Racism," *Bibliotheca Sacra* (Jan – March, 1996), 91. There are other indications in the Old Testament of the value placed upon slaves. For example, a person under the law of the Old Testament could obtain freedom from slavery in several ways:

1. One who was a slave due to defaulting on a debt was to be freed in the seventh year (Ex. 21; Deut 15).
2. If someone has sold themselves into slavery, he was to be released in the Year of Jubilee (Lev 25:3).
3. A freeborn girl sold by her father on the condition that her master marry her must be freed if the master refused to live up to the conditions of the sale (Ex. 21:7-11).
4. Any Hebrew slave could be freed by a near kinsman who paid the necessary redemption price (Lev. 25); If a slave was injured by his master, he was to be freed (Ex 21:26-27). This emancipation of slaves became a model for the emancipation of all slaves and of all peoples. In fact, God constantly reminds Israel that she herself was a slave in Egypt: "Remember that you were slaves in Egypt and that the LORD your God brought you out of there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm." (Deut. 5:15).

<sup>x</sup> The New Testament affirms this. Paul says, "We are the offspring of God" (Acts 17:29). He also reminds the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers of Athens, "From one man he made every nation of men..." (17:26).

<sup>xi</sup> Mercer, 88.

<sup>xii</sup> Webster's Dictionary defines racism as: "A belief that race is the primary determinant of human traits and capabilities and that racial differences produce an inherent superiority of a particular race."

<sup>xiii</sup> The New Testament passages that address the issue of slavery are: Col. 3:22; 1 Peter 2:18; Eph. 6:5-7; Titus 2:9-10; 1 Tim. 6:1-6. In Christ, all such social barriers are broken down. Gal. 3:28 There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. When Paul urges slaves to be obedient to their masters, he is not condoning the institution of slavery. Again, remember that God is at work in the world *as it is*. Paul is simply speaking of how believers should live in light of the present reality of slavery. Paul does not criticize the institution, but tells believers how they should live in light of the institution. Just like the Old Testament, rather than focusing on the institution, he focuses on the *attitudes* that should characterize masters and slaves. Paul actually

undermines the system of slavery by commanding Philemon to treat Onesimus as “a beloved brother” (Philemon 16). But why did he not urge believers to overthrow such an evil social institution? The Bible does not call us to reform society. It calls us to be salt and light within society as it exists. But there are also practical reasons for the silence of the New Testament on this issue. If Paul had said one single word that would have led the slaves of the Roman Empire to revolt, both the slaves as well as the newly founded Church would have been crushed by the Roman Empire. Twice in the previous century, Rome was responsible for crushing revolts in Sicily. Not only would it have led to a blood-bath and the loss of life, but there was also the danger of thousands of unbelievers joining the ranks of the church merely for the sake of abolishing the institution. Quite frankly, the same can be true today. When the church becomes focused in reforming society, and loses its focus of being salt and light, the lines become blurred. Today, the church runs the risk of being confused with the political right and capitalistic values, rather than with a sincere care and compassion for the oppressed and needy

<sup>xiv</sup> <http://gbgm-umc.org/umw/wesley/wilber.stm>.