

What Does
the Bible
Say About... ?

Slavery and Freedom

“What Does the Bible Say About...?” Series

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Series Editor

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Say About... ?

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To those whose quest for
true freedom helps all of us recognize
the image of the divine that we carry.

Series Preface

The Bible remains the world's number one best-seller of all time. Millions of copies in more than two thousand languages and dialects are sold every year, yet how many are opened and read on a regular basis? Despite the impression the Bible's popularity might give, its riches are not easy to mine. Its message is not self-evident and is sometimes hard to relate to our daily lives.

This series addresses the need for a reliable guide to reading the Bible profitably. Each volume is designed to unlock the Bible's mysteries for the interested reader who asks, "What does the Bible say about...?" Each book addresses a timely theme in contemporary culture, based upon questions people are asking today, and explaining how the Bible can speak to these questions as reflected in both Old and New Testaments.

Ideal for individual or group study, each volume consists of short, concise chapters on a biblical theme in non-technical language, and in a style accessible to all. The expert authors have been chosen for their knowledge of the Bible. While taking into account current scholarship, they know how to explain the Bible's teaching in simple language. They are also able to relate the biblical message to the challenges of today's Church and society while avoiding a simplistic use of the biblical text for trying to "prove" a point or defend a position, which is called

“prooftexting”—an improper use of the Bible. The focus in these books is on a religious perspective, explaining what the Bible says, or does not say, about each theme. Short discussion questions invite sharing and reflection.

So, take up your Bible with confidence, and with your guide explore “what the Bible says about SLAVERY AND FREEDOM.”

Introduction

“Let freedom ring.” These three words express a basic human desire, perhaps more aptly, a basic human need. They are words of resolve, determination, and hope. They can be found in country songs and Christian hymns, in civil rights speeches, and in poetry. These words “ring” true because so many in our world know what it is to be trapped in unhealthy and sometimes self-imposed patterns, to be captive to forces beyond one’s control, and even to be enslaved physically.

The universal yearning to be free has been behind most political revolutions and movements. Likewise, it is the foundation of almost every treatment plan for those dealing with addictions. And it is certainly a constant theme of the spiritual life as, one by one, sinful impulses and patterns are stripped away and the freedom of God’s mercy is embraced.

Freedom, however, requires a consciousness of what binds us, a realization of how we have kept others from experiencing true freedom, and a call for justice for those who are enslaved in systems and policies that fail to honor the dignity of all of creation. In other words, before we can fully enjoy the “freedom of the glory of the children of God” (as St. Paul says in Romans 8:21), we have to identify forms of oppression that enslave so many.

Perhaps most of us have experienced bondage to sin and the accompanying frustration of working to change our behaviors, even as we cling to the mercy of God that cannot be earned. Many of us know firsthand what it feels like to lose control of situations at work or in the civic community, to feel frustrated and trapped in systems that are not life-giving, and do not honor human dignity. Some of us are witnesses to the lack of freedom that comes as a result of little access to education or opportunities. Few of us, however, have experienced actual slavery.

It might be surprising to learn that experts estimate there are between thirty and forty-five million people who are enslaved in the twenty-first century across the globe. The Borgen Project, a global poverty education and advocacy group based in the United States, shares statistics that indicate 78 percent of these are enslaved for labor and 22 percent for sex.¹ We may have believed physical slavery was a distant reality abolished decades and even centuries ago, but the widespread practice of forced labor and human trafficking keeps slavery alive and, sadly, quite well. Yet, the desire and the fight for freedom is also healthy and on the march.

What does the Bible tell us about the experience of slavery? How does the Bible address the issues of injustice that give rise to various forms of slavery? Why is slavery not condemned outright in the Bible? Do justice and human dignity play a role in what the Bible describes as freedom? What other aspects of freedom might we appreciate more deeply in our reading of God's Word?

Religion has been used for centuries to justify attitudes and actions that are sometimes contrary to the very heart of the sacred texts recognized by those same religions. The sacred texts of the Bible have been misused off and on for generations, sometimes to justify the slavery of others and often in attempts to dignify values that are anything but Christian. More often than not, however, the Bible has a way of calling us to a reckoning. It provides an invitation to a truly liberating experience of God, and it shapes our individual and communal conscience, if we let it. Moreover, the Bible provides imagery and language that can help to shape a world that allows true freedom to flourish.

Chapter One

The Bible Tells Me So

Many children would have learned, as I did, the simple song with the familiar refrain, “Yes, Jesus loves me. / Yes, Jesus loves me. / Yes, Jesus loves me. / The Bible tells me so.” I grew up feeling confident that what I needed to know for life could be found in the Bible, and that I could trust what I found there. I still know this to be true, but with a deeper appreciation for the kind of truth the Bible imparts.

If we go to the Bible expecting a science lesson, or even a history lesson by twenty-first century standards, we will be disappointed. Ancient peoples did not concern themselves primarily with reporting direct factual data but with uncovering and pondering deeper truths. And so, if we open our Bibles seeking God’s truth for our salvation, we will find it. We will be comforted (yes, Jesus does love me, and does love you) and challenged (not by the world’s standards, but by God’s standards). The Bible can become for us the good news that God is love, and become *in* us the way to life. It matters how we read it, and whether we are open to its deep lessons.

On the topic of slavery and freedom, we come across a bitter irony that cannot and should not be erased. The same Bible that is the source of truth for me, and became

the source of hope for Africans enslaved in America, was used by many White slave owners to justify owning slaves.

Numerous writings explore how slavery has been justified by people who profess to be Christian. A few examples will demonstrate some of the arguments:

- The patriarchs and matriarchs of Israel held slaves without the Bible recording a word of disapproval from God. As a specific example, Sarah's slave, Hagar, gave birth to Abraham's first son (Genesis 16).
- The account of the Ten Commandments refer to the treatment of slaves twice (Exodus 20:10, 17) without any condemnation of the practice.
- According to the Gospels, Jesus never addressed the issue of slavery even though it was a widespread institution across the Roman Empire at the time.
- In a letter attributed to Paul, the writer did speak about slavery, but he encouraged slaves to obey their masters, and even gave a spiritual gloss to this command (Ephesians 6:5-9).

Slaveholders and Christianity

Slave owners in seventeenth through nineteenth century America were often seen as upright Christians, shrewd in business, and faithful members of their churches. They either saw no contradiction between their faith and their

ownership and treatment of slaves, or they believed they had an inherent right to use forced labor to prosper. Some even believed that their purchase of slaves was part of a larger effort to convert western Africa to Christianity.²

Bishop Stephen Elliott, the first and only bishop of the Protestant Episcopal Church in the Confederate States of America, addressed his church convention each year. In his 1861 address, he wrote the following:

However the world may judge us in connection with our institution of Slavery, we conscientiously believe it to be a great missionary institution—one arranged by God, as he arranges all the moral and religious influences of the world, so that good may be brought out of seeming evil, and a blessing wrung out of every form of the curse. We believe that we are educating those people [African slaves] as they are educated no where [sic] else; that we are elevating them in every generation; that we are working out God's purposes, whose consummation we are quite willing to leave in his hands. . . . We feel sure, that when the whirlwind of passion shall have passed, we shall receive justice at the hands of God's people, being determined, meanwhile, by the grace of God, to defend with the sacrifice of everything, if need be, this sacred charge which has been committed to us. We can not [sic] permit our servants to be cursed with the liberty of licentiousness and infidelity, but we will truly