

Slavery and the Christian

I Peter 2:18-20

Introduction

One of the great narratives in the life of the prophet Elisha - involved the testimony of a young Israelite girl - - - who had become a servant of the wife of Syria's military captain - - - Naaman

Naaman had developed leprosy - - - the young servant indicated that she wished that he could meet the prophet Elisha - - - because he would be able to cure him of leprosy

Naaman goes to meet Elisha - - - and is told to go dip in the Jordan river 7X - - - he, at first is reluctant - - - but then obeys the word of the prophet and gets healed by God's power

It was a miracle that demonstrated there is a God in Israel

The account begins with these words

II Kings 5:1-2 - 'Now Naaman, captain of the army of the king of Aram, was a great man with his master, and highly respected, because by him the Lord had given victory to Aram. The man was also a valiant warrior, but he was a leper. Now the Arameans had gone out in bands, and had taken captive a little girl from the land of Israel; and she waited on Naaman's wife.'

We say, 'wait a minute - - - this little girl who gave testimony of God's power thru the prophet Elisha - - - was a captive / a slave in a foreign land

She really got a raw deal in life - shouldn't she be bitter? / maybe a bit angry at God?
Instead - she is telling others how awesome God is

The Bible - is not just a spiritual text - - - but also a factual record of historical narrative

It would be in error - if the Bible did not make reference to slavery - as many cultures throughout history - made use of the practice

Many of God's people have - functioned as slaves at times - in history

Joseph was sold as a slave to Egypt

Daniel and his three friends - - - were taken captive by the Babylonians - - - trained and put to work in their new society

Israel endured 400 years of slavery to the Egyptians - before the Exodus -

Throughout history - - - one finds the presence of slaves - - - and the first century Roman Empire in which Jesus and the disciples lived was no exception

By some estimates - 1/3 of the population of some of the metropolitan areas were slaves - they were a major part of the workforce

Slaves came from being captives of war

A person might become a slave - being unable to pay their debts

Some were born into slavery

Slavery has existed as a mixture of economic policy / wars of conquest / dealing with the poor in the land / etc.

Slaves occupied at times - places of great importance - - - at times were highly educated - - - capable of managing affairs of state - - - such as Joseph or Daniel - - - they were tutors / tradesman / accountants / doctors / musicians

Not all slaves were mistreated - - - some became like trusted members of a family

For some people -slavery was simply a way of life - the role assigned them by society

As we come to our passage this morning - we are reminded of the reality of slavery in much of history

Several questions are raised by such passages:

Does the Bible endorse slavery?

Secondly - What does the Bible teach about injustice and oppression in this fallen world?

Thirdly - Can this passage help the modern Christian know how to approach their own job and the work environment in which they find themselves?

I. Does the Bible Endorse Slavery?

This text raises the question to modern readers - of the historical practice of slavery

The United States passed the 13th Amendment in 1865 - outlawing slavery in the United States - after a very costly Civil War - fought over the issue

‘Does the Bible endorse slavery?’

The simple answer: What we find in the Bible is that God is against injustice and oppression - and some forms of slavery were not seen as oppression

People ask the question ‘Why didn’t the Apostles and Jesus denounce and repudiate slavery as an institution?’

The gospel as it came into the world - - - came into a world in which slavery existed - - - the Apostles addressed Christians in the society in which they lived

Daniel Doriani: 'Peter is not endorsing or blessing slavery. Rather, he tells believing slaves how to live within a pervasive, entrenched institution.'

The Apostles dealt with people where they lived - they did not live in a free society - the apostles themselves had no political clout to change social structures

To incite slave rebellion in the Roman empire - would merely lead to the deaths of the slaves - and there were no political options to root it out

Paul once pointed to the idea that some might be able to secure their freedom

I Cor. 7:21 - 'Were you called [to Christ] while a slave? Do not worry about it; but if you are able also to become free, rather do that.'

If you can get free great - - - but that won't be possible for many of you - - - so - - - this is how to live righteously in your station in life

We might be reminded of the 'Serenity Prayer'

God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change
The courage to change the things I can
And the wisdom to know the difference

For the Apostles - - - what is of ultimate significance is not whether you were a slave or free - - - but whether you knew Jesus Christ as your Savior - - - and had been set free from sin

This life is the one that is transient and fleeting - we are just vapors that appear for a while - - - but the life to come - - - is for eternity - - - and so matters of the soul are of greater significance

The chief motive of the Christian is to glorify Christ in all things - and in all stations of life - wherever he finds himself

Slave conditions have varied throughout history

In Rome - many slaves were paid - or had limits to the period of servitude - more like a job - or they could purchase their freedom

In ancient Israel - they had the year of Jubilee in which debts were forgiven / slaves set free - even made provision for slaves that might choose to remain with their master after they had earned freedom [Deut. 15] / [i.e. - they decided it wasn't such a bad life - all things considered]

Not all slavery was barbaric or immoral - it simply was a social structure that allowed people to exist - - - after their nation was defeated in battle - or as a means of survival / or paying a debt

In most cultures and periods of history - there was no social safety net for the poor / the weak / the unemployed / those with debts they could not pay

Life was hard - and handouts did not come easily

II Kings 4:1-7

A poor widow - who has debts she cannot pay - - - the only thing she has are her two boys - -
- who are not able to do much work yet

But - they could be worth something as slaves

These were hard times - but she was looking to God

Elisha told her to borrow vessels - and take her one jar of oil and pour it into the borrowed vessels - - and go sell the oil to pay off her creditors

She did and she was able to keep her children

What Jesus did - and what Christianity did - was ultimately teach principles that undermined the institution of slavery where Christian moral principles were embraced

What principle was that?

The Golden Rule: 'Do unto others as you would have done unto you.'

If you could show that the kind of slavery practiced in America violated that principle - - -
you had a very persuasive argument politically for abolition

That is exactly what happened in American history

If you read some of the modern day atheists - you get the idea that there was this noble band of virtuous atheists who decided that slavery was evil and they overthrow the institution - all the while Christians opposed and protested their efforts pointing to the Bible!

The fact of the matter is that Some of the most ardent abolitionists [18th / 19th century] were from the ranks of Christians - - - William Wilberforce in England [member of parliament] - -
- Harriet Beecher Stowe who wrote "Uncle Tom's Cabin" was a preacher's daughter [Lyman Beecher] - - - her brother Henry Ward Beecher was a preacher and also abolitionist - - - John Wesley / John Woolman preached against it / John Newton - all the Christians who supported the underground railroad - or path to freedom

Frederick Douglass - was a famous abolitionist during the Civil War era. He was born into slavery - taught himself how to read with some help from some white children. - black slaves were generally denied education

After seeing his aunt whipped - he grew to despise the institution of slavery - it was oppressive and barbaric and unjust

He later escaped - and his supporters purchased his freedom

He wrote and spoke so powerfully against Southern slavery - that he felt he needed to clarify where he stood on Christianity

Douglas made great use of the Bible - showing how the practice of slavery in the U.S. was condemned on Christian principle - indefensible

Douglass: 'I love the pure, peaceable, and impartial Christianity of Christ: I therefore hate the corrupt, slave-holding, women whipping, cradle-plundering, partial and hypocritical Christianity of this land. Indeed, I can see no reason, but the most deceitful one, for calling the religion of this land Christian [i.e. the South]. I look upon it as the climax of all misnomers, the boldest of all frauds, and the grossest of all libels.'

Douglass: 'He who sells my sister, for purposes of prostitution, stands forth as the pious advocate of purity. He who proclaims it a religious duty to read the Bible denies me the right of learning to read the name of God who made me. He who is the religious advocate of marriage robs whole millions of its sacred influence, and leaves them to the ravages of wholesale pollution. The warm defender of the sacredness of the family relation is the same that scatters whole families, - sundering husbands and wives, parents and children, sisters and brothers, - leaving the hut vacant and the hearth desolate.'

Douglass said - there is no way you can defend what is going on in the South with the Bible or the Christian religion

The issue of slavery touches upon a much larger issue in Scripture - which is that of injustice and oppression in the world

Sin takes on many different shapes and forms in this world - one form is that of injustice and oppression

Since we live in a world where sin is universal

Job 15:16 - 'Man, who drinks iniquity like water!'

We basically chose oppression when we chose to rebel against God

We were in the Garden of Eden - - - [life was great] - but we got kicked out

This is where sin and rebellion lead - to a world filled with sin / oppression / injustice

History is filled with the sordid record of man's inhumanity to man

Solomon pondered the reality of oppression in the book of Ecclesiastes

Ecclesiastes 4:1-3 - oppression / injustice in the world is a vanity

Solomon congratulates the dead or those never born - - - for they don't have to live and see the evil done under the sun

It is a vanity - that will only be corrected when the kingdom comes

*** Oppression was not the program of the Garden of Eden! / it came in thru sin - - - it is part of living in a fallen world

The Bible's response to injustice / evil - - - is that of a future day of judgment

Ecclesiastes 12:13, 14 - 'The conclusion when all has been heard is: fear God and keep His commandments, because this applies to every person. For God will bring every act to judgment, everything which is hidden, whether it is good or evil.'

There will be a resolution to the moral chaos of this fallen world

For now - We are called to stand for justice and righteousness - look forward to God's kingdom

Amos 5:24 - 'Let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.'

II. The Righteous Sufferer - vv. 18-20

Here Peter gives dignity to the life of a slave - who may face oppression - and who is unable to change their lot in life

He reminds them that God is on the side of the righteous sufferer - - - and such will be rewarded in eternity

Jesus was treated unjustly - - - but His endurance of that suffering resulted in our salvation

The Bible does not endorse the wicked and unjust treatment of Jesus at the hands of godless sinners - - - it frames the suffering in the context of atonement - - - and God bringing good out of evil

Judas - who betrayed Jesus is in hell - Jesus said as much
Pilate - the Pharisees - unless they repented - - - will face God's justice on their treatment of His Son

Peter wants his readers to understand that following Christ and living right - does not exempt one from suffering in this fallen world

The righteous sufferer looks to God to bring ultimate vindication and deliverance

We might think of the Tribulation martyrs

Rev. 6:10 - 'And they cried out with a loud voice, saying, "How long, O Lord, holy and true, wilt Thou refrain from judging and avenging our blood on those who dwell on the earth?'

Revelation 6:11 - 'And there was given to each of them a white robe; and they were told that they should rest for a little while longer, until the number of their fellow servants and their brethren who were to be killed even as they had been, should be completed also.'

Message: the triumph of the wicked is short-lived

The righteous sufferer looks to God for deliverance

God delivered Israel out from under the oppression of the Egyptians - He heard their cry

Exodus 3:7-8

They had lived under the oppression of Pharaoh and the Egyptians - - - and they had no political power / no military might to gain their freedom

God stepped in and delivered them
The oppressed show their faith by calling upon God in prayer

In a free society - part of righteousness includes a vigilance - standing guard at the gate of freedom

Christians have historically played a great role in laying the foundation stones of American freedom and prosperity

I remember a few years ago - when I was in Russia - and my host took me to the site of a Stalin Bunker that was built during WW II - in Samara

He said the workers who built the bunker disappeared afterwards - - - likely put to death - because they knew where it was - [if Moscow fell - then Stalin would have moved to this bunker]

I asked Sasha what the average Russian thought of Stalin – do they look up to him historically? He said, ‘no – they hate him.’ The comment struck me as I thought about our own country and how we view our history. Our presidential history is dotted with names like Washington, Madison, Lincoln, Roosevelt, Truman, and Reagan. Many good men who sought to preserve freedom - and served the good of the American people

Psalm 33:12 - 'Blessed is the nation whose God is the Lord.'

When a government stands for justice / freedom and righteousness - - - the people rejoice

When the people are oppressed - they groan / they sigh / they languish

III. The Christian Worker

Are there some principles here that can be applied to the Christian at work?

Christianity gives a dignity to work and labor

Col. 3:23, 24 - 'Whatever you do, do your work heartily, as for the Lord rather than for men; knowing that from the Lord you will receive the reward of the inheritance. It is the Lord Christ whom you serve.'

Does God care what kind of employee we are?

Yes - He does

In a free country and a land of opportunity - - - if you don't like your job - you can change jobs

But - in whatever station we find ourselves - we are to be faithful / hard-working / honest

Bill Gaither shares a story that points to the testimony of a good work ethic in our world

Gloria and I in our early years - were teaching school in Alexandria, IN where I grew up and we wanted a piece of land where we could build a house. I noticed a parcel just outside of town where cattle grazed and I learned it belonged to a 92 year old retired banker named Mr. Yule. He owned a lot of land in the area, and he gave the same speech to everyone who inquired: 'I promised the farmers they could use it for cattle.'

Gloria and I visited him at the bank. Although he was retired, he spent a couple of hours each morning in his office. He looked at us over the top of his bifocals. I introduced myself and told him we were interested in a piece of his land. 'Not selling' – he said pleasantly. 'Promised it to a farmer for grazing. I know but we teach school here and thought maybe you'd be interested in selling it to someone planning to settle in the area He pursed his lips and stared at me. 'What'd you say your name was?' Gaither – Bill Gaither Hmmm – any relation to Grover Gaither? Yes – sir – he was my grandfather

Mr. Yule – put down his paper and removed his glasses. Interesting. Grover Gaither was the best worker I ever had on my farm. Full day's work for a day's pay. So honest. What'd you say you wanted? I told him again. Let me do some thinking on it, then come back and see me

Well - Bill checked back within the week and Mr. Yule - said he would sell - and also gave them the land they needed at a great price

Bill: 'Nearly 3 decades later – my son and I strolled that beautiful, lush property that had once been pasture land.'

'Benjy' – I said, 'You've had this wonderful place to grow up thru nothing that you've done, but because of the good name of a great grandfather you've never met.

What helped produce that good name - - - was the fact that he was a good worker

Conclusion

In England in the early 19th century - - - they had something called debtor prisons. Those sentenced to debtor prison - were those who had failed to pay off a debt of some kind - - - the court sent them to prison - where they would be assigned some kind of work - to pay off that debt - [life was hard]

In fact - Author Charles Dickens' father was sent to debtor prison - for a debt he owed to a baker. This event forced Charles to drop out of school at age twelve and go to work for a factory

Throughout Dicken's novels you see a sympathy for the poor of society

When we come to Scripture - we find that God looks upon the oppressed - and He has great sympathy for them

He looks upon us in our plight - as debtor's who owe a great debt

This debt is due to our sin - - - and it could overwhelm us and destroy us - but we find that God in mercy has made provision for us at Calvary - - for those who put their trust in Jesus

Colossians 2:13-14 - 'And when you were dead in your transgressions and the uncircumcision of your flesh, He made you alive together with Him, having forgiven us all our transgressions, having canceled out the certificate of debt consisting of decrees against us and which was hostile to us: and He has taken it out of the way, having nailed it to the cross.'

Jesus came and paid the debt of our sins - - - that we might go free

Set free from sin / guilt and condemnation - - - unto the liberty of life in Christ