



# Does The Bible Condone Slavery?

**Answers to Bible Questions**

*Skeptics today question the existence of God or of His Divine Authorship of the Bible. They would have us believe that the Bible is simply written by men of the past, that it is not holy and is full of bad morals and contradictions. One of the arguments for their view is that they say the Bible teaches slavery, oppression, and mistreatment of people. But is this actually the case? In this small booklet we will investigate a few of their objections to God and His Word and answer them.*

## **“If God is love, why did He ever allow slavery to exist?”**

The question is self-answering, for the very reason slavery ever even existed in the world was precisely because God doesn't practice or condone slavery. Let me explain what I mean. The Bible says, *“God is love”* (1 John 4:8) and slavery is not loving. Slavery as we view it today, is *forcing someone to work for or serve someone else, against their will*, either by physical force or sometimes by manipulation. God does not force. He allows people the freedom of choice (Joshua 24:15; 1 Kings 18:21). The Bible says, *“where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty”* (2 Corinthians 3:17). God could have forced Adam and Eve to obey Him but that is contrary to His character of love. He wants His created beings to serve Him from love and not fear (1 John 4:18). So God allowed mankind to choose who they would serve which left the possibility that they would make the wrong choice. Had God forced man to serve Him, God Himself would now be a slave-master. But God is not a

slave-master. As a result of God allowing freedom of choice to mankind, sin came into the world, and with sin came all other evils including slavery. God cannot be blamed for the results of the choice mankind made. He warned them what the results would be if they disobeyed. But He didn't take away their ability to choose, He let them make the choice. By letting them make their own choice He showed that slavery (or forcing someone to serve someone against their will) is totally contrary to His character of love. The devil on the other hand, who is the ultimate slave-master, will take total control allowing no freedom of choice if he is yielded to. This is illustrated by the demoniacs (**Matthew 17:15-18; Mark 9:17-27; Mark 5:1-20**). But Jesus who is our picture of God's character shows us that even after mankind chose the slavery of sin God's plan was always “*to proclaim liberty to the captives*” (**Isaiah 61:1**).

### **“Weren't the bondmen of the ancient Hebrews actually slaves?”**

The Hebrew word translated as bondmen simply means servants. Out of the 801 times that Hebrew word is used in the Old Testament, 734 times it is translated as the words servant or servants. In some places it is also translated as menservants or the like. It is used as a polite form of introduction when speaking to an equal or superior person (**Genesis 33:14; 42:10**), in Messianic prophecies to reference Christ as the servant of God (**Isaiah 42:1, 2 and 52:13,14**), and as a reference to

prophets and godly men as servants of God (**Judges 2:8; Zechariah 1:6**). Servant-hood did not just mean manual labor. Joseph's servants/bondmen were the physicians that embalmed his father (**Genesis 50:2**). Daniel and his 3 friends who were servants/bondmen in Babylon were educated and became statesman (**Daniel 1:12**). So we can see that there was a wide variety of meaning behind this word. To think that it only implies slavery is incorrect.

Furthermore the bondmen/servants of ancient Israel were not kidnapped and sold like in modern trafficking. Kidnapping and selling a man is strictly forbidden in the Old Testament. In the Mosaic law to kidnap and sell a man was punished by death (**Exodus 21:16**). The selling and buying of servants was more a selling and buying of their services and was consensual. Even today some people do almost the same by signing contracts that they will work for someone for a certain amount of years. They are then in one sense of the word "bound" to their employer. There were different reasons men might be sold as bond-servants in ancient Israel. One was in the case of theft (**Exodus 22:3**). If the thief could not repay what he had stolen then he was sold and must work off the amount he had stolen.

The Bible also mentions men becoming poor and selling themselves (**Leviticus 25:47**). God had put in place many laws to prevent poverty and if poverty happened there were laws about taking care of the poor, so this would not have been necessary if everyone was

following God's way completely. But because of the hardness of men's hearts, like in the case of divorce (**Matthew 19:6-8**) and also choosing a king (**1 Samuel 8:6-9; Deuteronomy 17:14-20**), God knew that men would not always follow His ways completely and so He put in place a "Plan B", so to speak. If poverty did occur and people became servants, God specified how the servants were to be treated and how they could be redeemed, and also the limits to the time they were allowed to serve.

Servants/bondmen to the Hebrew people in OT times had many rights which modern slave-owners would not give their slaves. If you look at Abraham, he had hundreds of servants/bondmen, but if you read how they were treated they were more like an extended part of the family. They could be armed and fight alongside their master (**Genesis 14:14, 15**) which would be rather dangerous because they could turn against their master if they were mistreated like modern slaves often were. They could also inherit property (**Genesis 15:2**). Abraham sent his servant/bondman to fetch a bride for his son. This servant traveled probably more than 400 miles to Haran, a journey of 2-3 weeks or more. Had this servant wanted to he could have easily escaped but it can be seen from his conversations with Abraham's family that he held his master and his master's God in high regard (**Genesis 24**). He was not an abused slave held against his will.

## **“Isn’t it true that only the male servants were set free but the female servants were not?”**

It is argued here that Hebrew male servants were allowed to go free but not female servants based on **verse 7 of Exodus 21**. But this argument results from reading that verse out of context and not comparing it with other places where the issue is discussed. If you continue to read **Exodus 21:8-11** it is in reference to if the master or his son were married or engaged to the woman. Obviously if marriage had taken place God would not want people to misconstrue His law and believe they must break up that relationship every seven years. In **Deuteronomy 15:12-17** which also talks about how they were to let Hebrew servants go free every seventh year (unless the servants chose to stay on longer), you will see it specifies that this also applies to the women who were servants.

## **“Doesn’t the Bible talk about slaves that were never set free, that served their masters ‘forever’ ?”**

The Bible verses that talk about “*forever*” servants are **Leviticus 25:46; Exodus 21:2-6; and Deuteronomy 15:16,17**.

Those who study the Bible will already recognize that the word “*forever*” in the Bible has a much broader



meaning than we use it today. For example, Jonah was in the belly of the fish

*“forever”* according to his own words in **Jonah 2:6**. Yet, in chapter **1:17** it says that he was in there only for 3 days and 3 nights. And earlier in the chapter of **Leviticus 25:32** the same word translated *“forever”* in **verse 46** is translated as *“at any time.”*

In **Leviticus 25:10** we read; *“And ye shall hallow the fiftieth year, and proclaim liberty throughout all the land unto all the inhabitants thereof: it shall be a jubile unto you; and ye shall return every man unto his possession, and ye shall return every man unto his family.”*

God specified that every 50 years, in the year of Jubilee, **EVERYONE** would be set at liberty.

But some say that *“all the inhabitants”* only applied to the Israelite servants, not the servants from other nations. They base this on **Leviticus 25:46** which said that the bondmen/servants from other nations would be bondmen *“forever.”*

But there is a major fault with this reasoning. If *“all the inhabitants”* really meant only *“all the Hebrews”* then that includes the Hebrew servants that were to serve their masters *“forever”* spoken of in **Exodus 21:2-6**. If the Hebrew servants who served *“forever”* were set free at the Jubilee than why would not the other nationalities

who were also said to serve “*forever*” be set free on Jubilee? Remember that earlier in **Leviticus 25** it was already stated that on the Jubilee, liberty would be proclaimed to “*all the inhabitants*” and “*every man*” was to be returned to his family (**Leviticus 25:10**). Thus later on in **chapter 25** when it says people would serve “*forever*” (or as it is translated in **verse 32** “*at any time*”), it would simply be understood to mean that this class of people was allowed to serve for any amount of time, within the 50 year period between the Jubilees. There was no 6-7 year limit like there was for the Hebrew servants. There is nothing in the Bible that suggests that any class of servants could serve beyond the Jubilee.

### **“Couldn’t Israel own slaves from other nations as ‘possessions’ ?”**

No, they could not! Even though in **Leviticus 25:45, 46** the word possession is used, these servants/bondmen were not considered “property” the same way as possessions or animals were. This is shown by the laws that taught that runaway slaves were not to be returned to their masters (**Deuteronomy 23:15, 16**) but runaway animals or lost items of property such as clothing were to be returned (**Deuteronomy 22:1-3**). So the type of “*possession*” spoken of here is not one that means the masters owned the minds and/or bodies of their servants. They “belonged” to the master and must render whatever services were in the agreement they had been bought for, but they still were treated as an



individual person with a mind of their own and they could leave. If they had been full out “property” of the master, to fail to return a runaway would have been stealing.

**Bible Interpretation Note:** *Here some may argue that we must take the Bible verses just as they read. “Possessions” must mean possessions, “forever” must mean “forever.” But God did not give us just one verse in the Bible and say we should base everything on that one verse. Because sometimes a verse can sound a specific way to us based on our biases and understanding of terms, when that is not actually what the verse is saying. We must use the whole Bible as its own interpreter to define what is meant by terms. Context (which includes the whole Bible) will determine what is being said.*

*For an example, the statement “Mary saw the man on the mountain with a telescope.” Depending on what I decide to read into this there are three different potential possessors of the telescope-- a female, a male, or a mountain. But if I look at the context of the story I might be able to gather clues as to who had the telescope.*

*Because the Mosaic laws were given in the ancient Hebrew language to ancient Israel who had a very different culture from what we have today, portions of it are sometimes difficult for us to understand. I learned that two people from two different cultures will interpret the same statement differently when I married a man from a different culture. When he said, “I will come now” I thought he would come right then, not in 5-10 minutes time. Later I learned the Afrikaans “now” is equivalent to our American “in a minute.” Both signify a “short period of time”, neither are actually meant to be taken literally by the words. But without that*

*understanding of his language and culture, I would have only seen contradictions in his life and behavior. It is the same with the Bible. **But the only real solid evidence we have to learn about the culture of the Bible is the Bible itself.** So we must compare all the verses in the Bible on a topic to get the picture of what was happening. On the surface, there is plenty enough evidence that God's laws were fair and just and protected the innocent people. Those who have studied the laws of other societies of that time also recognize that the Bible's laws were far superior to any other nation's laws.*

**“But with the context of the previous verses before Leviticus 25:44-46 isn't it clear that a distinction was made and the Hebrews were to be servants, but the other nations were to be slaves?”**

You will notice **Leviticus 25:44-46** says these bondmen could come either from the nations/heathen around them or from the strangers *“that do sojourn among you.”* By mentioning the strangers alongside the heathen nations, God gave us sufficient evidence to understand what He is talking about, if we will but read the rest of the Bible. To say that here was promoted slavery and mistreatment of the other nations or strangers even contradicts the rest of the book of Leviticus which was written by the exact same author.

Just a few chapters earlier in **Leviticus 19:33-34** the author of Leviticus commanded the Israelites that: *“if a stranger sojourn with thee in your land, ye shall not vex*

[Hebrew: mistreat or oppress] *him. But the stranger that dwelleth with you shall be unto you as one born among you, and thou shalt love him as thyself; for ye were strangers in the land of Egypt: I am the LORD your God.*”

Here the Israelites were commanded to love the stranger as themselves. But just a few chapters later some people today think the exact same author told them they could enslave the stranger’s children and oppress and mistreat them? *Those two ideas do not harmonize.* Furthermore, why would He tell the Israelites in **chapter 19** to treat the stranger well (reminding them that they themselves had been strangers in Egypt who clearly were not treated well), and then in **chapter 25** tell them to enslave and treat the strangers exactly like they themselves were treated in Egypt? It is also in Leviticus that the author specifies that in regard to moral laws the same laws that applied to Israel applied to the strangers (**Leviticus 24:17-22**).

But Leviticus is not the only book in the Mosaic law that teaches love and care for the strangers. The weight of evidence supports the views of **Leviticus 19** which is just one of many references that commanded Israel to love and not oppress or mistreat the strangers. Here are just a few of the other references. (**Exodus 23:9; 22:21; Deuteronomy 10:17-19; 24:17, 18**). Notice in each of these cases, Israel is reminded of themselves being strangers in Egypt. They are commanded to be kind and loving in their treatment of strangers BECAUSE they were strangers in Egypt and were not treated lovingly but

were enslaved. Furthermore the judges of Israel were commanded not to be partial in their judgement in cases where there were strangers involved (**Deuteronomy 1:16, 17**). God felt strong enough against the perverting of judgment of strangers that those who did this were cursed (**Deuteronomy 27:19**).

So it is clear that the view of **Leviticus 25** teaching the enslavement and mistreatment of strangers, contradicts not only the rest of the book of Leviticus but also the entire rest of the Mosaic law. Clearly, those that hold that view are misunderstanding **Leviticus 25**. As we already saw the Bible shows that “*forever*” and “*possession*” meant different than what we think. And the word “*bondmen*” is simply the word for servant. So when the passage in **Leviticus 25** is read with these understandings there is not that large of a difference between the Hebrew and Non-Hebrew servants. The exception being that Non-Hebrew servants were allowed to bind themselves longer than the 6-7 years allotted for Hebrew servants. But then they still had the limit of the Jubilee.

**“But doesn’t it say that masters who beat their servants would not be punished if the servants didn’t die?”**

A quick look at **Exodus 21:20, 21** might lead to that conclusion, but not if we look at all the laws concerning the beating of servants in the Mosaic law. This was a

judicial law showing the punishment the judges should give in cases of violence. If the servant was beaten to death then the master must definitely be punished or as the word is translated elsewhere *“avenged.”* The punishment mentioned just a few verses earlier for someone dying after being smitten is the death penalty (**Exodus 21:12**). Here in **verse 20** the same Hebrew word translated “punished” is repeated twice (thus why it is translated in English as *“surely punished”*). God is stressing the point that the master should receive the death penalty if the servant died. Murder was murder even if the victim was a servant. Obviously if the servant did not die from the beating the death penalty would be a rather harsh punishment to give the master. This is why it says, *“he shall not be punished”*, i.e. receive the death penalty. Instead when the servant survived the beating two other laws given to the Israelites concerning mistreated servants would still apply.

If permanent physical harm was done by the beating, even if it was as little as losing a tooth, it was required that the servant be given his or her freedom (**Exodus 21:26, 27**). Thus the master lost his “money.” This is the reason it says he would not be *“punished”* (receive the death penalty) because his punishment was losing “money” by losing his paid for servant and all the necessary labour that servant would have done.

And even if permanent physical harm was not done, the servant had the right to leave the abusive master and

run away. And the law forbade anyone to return him to the master (**Deuteronomy 23:15, 16**). Thus again the master lost his “money.”

**“Why, in Leviticus 19:20, was a bondmaid who committed adultery punished but the man was not?”**

This is based on the way the text was translated in the KJV. The KJV was required to be based as far as possible on the Bishops Bible, unless in order to be properly translated they needed to change something. The Bishops Bible (as well as several other old Bibles) translated this text *“she shall be scourged”*. The Hebrew here doesn’t appear to have a clear word indicating who was to be scourged so although the KJV translators stuck with the Bishops reading in the main text they put two other translations in the margin. According to the margin this passage could also be accurately translated with the word *“they”* so both would have been punished or also just read *“there shall be a scourging.”* Both marginal readings show that both genders were punished. God is clear in his other laws that both men and woman were punished for adultery.

**“Did the New Testament endorse slavery?”**

No, it did not. Just like in the Old Testament, to kidnap people and sell them into slavery is seen as a sin (**1 Timothy 1:10**). But the New Testament situation on



slavery was a little bit different. The New Testament took place in the time of the Roman Empire which was built on slavery. It is estimated that during the Roman Empire's height of power, one third of the the population was slaves. And the laws of the Roman Empire were more in the favor of the masters rather than the slaves. A lot of cruelty went on under the Roman Empire. Sometimes slaves were tattooed on their foreheads so they could be recognized as a runaway slave if they went out in public and be returned to their masters. Even freed slaves were restricted from certain privileges such as voting or full citizenship and many of them were still treated as outcasts.

Into this culture that was so built on slavery, comes Paul and the disciples with the gospel. Slavery was so interwoven and an important part of Roman society that to make open attack on it would only serve to create prejudice, chaos, and possibly even fully shut down the spread of the gospel. So in order to change slavery it was necessary for the gospel to be taught, showing that all men are equal in God's eyes and everyone is to be treated with love and respect as fellow brothers and sisters. Only by having the principles of the gospel permeate the society would slavery be brought to an end.

A Christian is supposed to always be loving and kind to others even if he is on the bad side of a situation. Jesus himself taught this in **Matthew 5:39-41**. So it is perfectly in harmony with the gospel for servants to be

submissive and loving to their masters, just like other Christians are told to submit to those in authority. For a slave to fight for his rights in Roman culture not only would prejudice unbelieving masters against the gospel, but in some cases might even lead to him being killed. When it came to masters that were converted to the gospel how were they told they should treat their servants? In the case of Philemon, a slave who had become converted Paul told his master who had also become a Christian,

*“For perhaps he therefore departed for a season, that thou shouldest receive him for ever; **Not now as a servant, but above a servant, a brother beloved, specially to me, but how much more unto thee, both in the flesh, and in the Lord? If thou count me therefore a partner, receive him as myself.** If he hath wronged thee, or oweth thee ought, put that on mine account; I Paul have written it with mine own hand, I will repay it: albeit I do not say to thee how thou owest unto me even thine own self besides.”* **Philemon 1:15-19**

So Paul counseled a Christian master, who by Roman culture should have punished severely or possibly even killed his runaway slave, to treat him, not as a servant, but as a beloved brother, even to treat him as he would treat Paul himself. Elsewhere Paul counseled masters to treat their servants kindly and affectionately and also to give them what was just and equal (**Ephesians 6:9; Colossians 4:1**).

## The Conclusion

Slavery as we interpret and define it today (based on what happened in the 17<sup>th</sup> through 19<sup>th</sup> centuries) was never condoned by God. That type of slavery He wholeheartedly condemned in the Bible, including under the Mosaic law. If the Bible had been studied in context and followed *as a whole* the European/American slave trade would never have existed. That is one reason why the majority of the abolitionists of the 19th century were Christians who used the Bible to expose modern slavery.

In fact, throughout the entire Bible, God commands us in various ways *"to let the oppressed go free."* (Isaiah 58:6) This is the work Jesus did, and this is the work all of His followers, who have His Spirit, will also do.

*"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he hath anointed me to preach the gospel to the poor; ... to preach deliverance to the captives,... to set at liberty them that are bruised, "* **Luke 4:18,19**

