



Is slavery in the Bible different than what we think of it?

This question came up during Sunday morning Bible Study.

Here are some relevant notes from an article "Slavery in the Bible" as recorded in the Lutheran Study Bible:

The Scriptures do not endorse or promote the practice of people holding other human beings as personal property. The Bible typically treats slavery in a negative light. "Freedom" through God's saving grace is a dominant theme in both testaments.

For example, when the Israelites were enslaved by the Egyptians God said this to Moses: "I have surely seen the affliction of My people who are in Egypt, and I have heard their cry because of their taskmasters, and I have come to deliver them out of the hand of the Egyptians and bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land flowing with milk and honey." (Exodus 3)

Following the exodus, the Law of Moses permitted the holding of even Israelite slaves, but only for a period of six years - slaves were to be released the beginning of every seventh year (Exodus 21:2) Bondage for life was only to be on a voluntary basis (Exodus 21:5-6).

In the New Testament, the Greek word for "slave" has a much broader meaning than what might be familiar to many today. In the Roman world, slaves could serve in a variety of positions (from chain gang to cook, from hairdresser to obstetrician). Roman slaves quite often help positions of great power and responsibility.

Slavery in the Roman world was not associated with the oppression of any particular race. Slaves were most often prisoners of war taken from foreign lands, or non-Roman individuals sold by their families to repay a debt.

While in service to their master, slaves could earn wages, buy and sell property, enter into contracts and own slaves themselves. Frequently Roman free persons sold themselves into slavery in order to pay debts, while non-Roman persons sold themselves in order to eventually gain Roman citizenship.

In His first letter to Timothy, Paul condemns those involved in 'kidnapping' persons to be sold into slavery, listing "enslavers" among those especially deserving of the Law's condemnation. (1 Timothy 1:10)

A short answer to the above question would be "Yes and No." Yes, slavery in Bible times - especially New Testament times - often looked different than what we tend to think of slavery in the United States in the 1700's and 1800's. And, no, even if people in Bible times had slaves for different reasons than in America, the temptations for those having slaves would be the same (because human nature is the same across the ages). Those in positions of authority over others are often tempted to abuse that authority or the people under them, and God is never okay with mistreatment or abuse of authority.

Thanks for asking,
Pastor David

Send your questions to pastor@livingwordlutheran.net