



Sermon Transcription • Philemon 1-3 (NIV)

The Slave Returns

Pastor Jeff Bucknam

[Please Note: This transcript has been lightly edited for ease of reading. Also, some headings have been added in square brackets to aid the reader in locating portions of the sermon.]

I want to tell you the true story behind the letter to Philemon. Philemon, he's a rich man. I know that because in the first lines of the letter that bears his name, we find out that he both host a church in his house, which means he has to have a large enough house in the ancient world to host said church, which means he's got a big place and that's not very common in those days; and we find out that he's a slave owner, which was common for lots of people in the ancient world and certainly for him that was the case. It meant that he had land holdings and he had the means to employ somebody like that. So he's got a lot of money. He's got a wife, her name's Apphia she is addressed in the letter as well. He's got a kid, Archippus, or "Archie" as we call him. And they together host this church in their home. Committed Christian people, love the church, love the Lord. They know the Apostle Paul, that's how they probably got into this, Philemon probably was appointed by Paul when he left the city or the town of Colossae—which is not a big town, right. It's not a Vancouver, it's more of an Abbotsford. He got appointed to be one of the leaders of the church in that town. And like I said, he owns slaves.

One of those slaves names was Onesimus. Onesimus maybe was in charge of something big and he failed to deliver. Or maybe he just got sick of Philemon on one particular day, we're not led to believe that Philemon was a harsh slave owner, there were harsh slave owners in those days. But there were also some very kind and generous ones we presume that Philemon, the way he's described in this letter was more of a generous kind. But something happened in the home of Philemon to lead Onesimus to say, "I'm out of here." So in the dark of night, he took off; but not before he took everything he could find. You can imagine him sneaking through the house late at night quietly, you know... tiptoeing and opening the drawers and grabbing the candlesticks or any kind of silver coins he can find, and before anybody is awake, he...he was gone. In those days, runaway slaves, if they were caught, the punishment was usually death. In fact there's stories about crucifixions of thousands of slaves who were runaways or something else that Rome made example of. So at least he was gonna get beaten to within an inch of his life, or he was going to get crucified, so this was a pretty big decision he had made to leave. Stole all the things, left and he took off to the furthest place he could find: Rome—2500 km away, it's a long trip. Didn't have a minivan for that. Went on his feet, he funded the trip likely with the stuff he had stolen and eventually ended up in Rome. Rome was a huge city, easy to mix in with the people there. It's a great place for a runaway slave to find himself. Especially one who's like awashed with cash. And we've presume that Onesimus, not a Christian yet, goes up there and just lives large with all this money that he's got. He does what anybody who's visiting Rome



or come to live in Rome does, he has lots of opportunities to fill your carnal desires in Rome. And we're to presume he did so. We don't know how long he was there, maybe a week, maybe... a month, maybe years. Probably more like years. And he just so happens to run across an associate of Paul's. We don't know which one. We don't know if it's Timothy or Epaphroditus, or where they met, whether it was on the street or in a shop, or just on the side of the road. Maybe it's at the Colosseum while they were watching some games or whatever. But he sat down next to one of these associates of Paul and they started a conversation we presume. Maybe the conversation went:

"Hey! My name's Timothy. Where you from?" As they sit there in the Colosseum watching the games.

"Oh I'm... long way away."

"Oh what do you do?"

"Um.. I'm in investments..."

"How long have you been in Rome?"

"Few years.."

And they start talking like you do. Timothy of course, being an associate of Paul's, he's gonna be interested in sharing the gospel with the guy. That's why he's there. That's why...that's how they view their whole lives, Paul and his associates', was to preach the gospel to the Gentiles. Here's a Gentile...Maybe Timothy proclaimed the gospel to him in that moment, or maybe he said, "Listen, I... I would like you to meet somebody. Would you come with me? He's an interesting guy. He's in Rome, he's under house arrest." And he was, Paul was under house arrest at the time. It doesn't mean he was in hole in the ground you know as a Roman prisoner. But he was under arrest, as a Roman citizen. Metaphorically "chained" to the guards, right? They had to come everyday and see him, and he couldn't leave his house. He needed people to come and take care of him, provide him goods, and food, and clothing, and all those sorts of things. Timothy was probably doing that kind of work for Paul at the time when he meets Onesimus. And then they invite Onesimus over, and for whatever reason Onesimus say "Yeah. That sounds great." And so he does, he goes over and visits Paul. Maybe it's on the first occasion or the second occasion or the third occasion, but eventually in these conversations that he has with Paul, he comes to faith in Christ. He believes the gospel message. Right? Christ died for my sins...and I can have eternal life through faith alone in him.

And he becomes immediately Paul's gopher, another one of these guys who does and all the delivery stuff for him. "Can you get me some chips from the store?" Yeah, Onesimus was that guy, you know. He was seasoned at that kind of work. Maybe it was a year that went by or two years and Paul and Onesimus become really close friends, start to trust each other. Paul says in the letter, "he's my very heart." Dear dear friends. Probably talked about all sorts of things. But some point along the way, Onesimus starts to get like, a strike in his spirit. He's a Christian now, and he's looking back over his life and he's starting to realize that there have been some significant places where he's wronged some people. And he's being bothered by this. And so he goes to Paul, maybe it's on one evening where they're sitting there around the fire or after a dinner that Onesimus has provided, and they sit there, and Onesimus finally says,

"Paul I've got to tell you something. Um...I have been...<pause> keeping a secret from you. <pause> It's about what happened before I was a Christian. But I feel like I need to share it with you. You see, I used to be from a town called 'Colossae'."



And Paul said, “Colossae? I know that town. In fact we planted a church there.” Paul says.
“Oh, did you? Well anyway, I was from this town of Colossae and I was a slave. And I ran away. I got my freedom on one night, but it wasn’t just my freedom that I got. I also stole from my owner, a whole lot of things—went through the whole house, cleaned the thing out.”
“Really? Who was your owner?”
“Philemon”
“<gasps> Philemon.. You know, Onesimus, Philemon was the man I left in charge of the church there when I planted. He’s a good man.”
“You know Philemon?”
“Yeah I know Philemon.”
“Oh....Oh no.”
“Well here’s the thing,” says Paul, “I have a letter I’ve written it to the church in Colossae. And I need somebody to carry it for me. So I want you to carry it back. You gotta go back and you gotta sort this thing out, man. But I’m not gonna leave you empty handed, I’m gonna give you another letter in your other hand and you’re gonna carry it. This one is gonna be directly to Philemon. And when you get there, I want you to hand him that letter. He needs both, but he’s not gonna be very happy, so hand him the letter that I’m writing on your behalf.”
Onesimus, to his credit, says, “Sure. I need to sort this out.”
And so he travels those 2500km back to Colossae. You can imagine the morning or the afternoon that he arrived and Philemon, out of his veranda drinking his sweet tea, or whatever it is that he was—olive tea, whatever it is he’s drinking at the time. And he looks off in the distance and he sees the familiar gait of a former slave of his who robbed him blind. And he thinks, [squinting looking into the distance] “Surely that’s not One—<laughing>—simus..Honey! [motions to come see] Apphia! Come here. Does that... Does that looks like Onesimus doesn’t it? But surely he would not come back. Not after all that he’s done to us.” The closer he got...the closer he got...it is. “It’s Onesimus!” <angry grunts>
“Honey...”

Imagine that meeting as Onesimus walks to him and he quickly fumbles for, out of his sack, the letters, the scrolls. And he said, “Before you get too angry, Philemon, I have a letter. It’s from a mutual friend, Paul. I met him in Rome. Here. He wants you to read it.” <angry voice> [grabs angrily] “Give me that... We’re gonna deal with you.” And he reads...Philemon 1-3,

“Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus [Honey! He’s a prisoner again. Can’t keep some people out of trouble...], and Timothy our brother [Aw.. Timothy’s still with him],
To Philemon our dear friend and fellow worker [You know, Onesimus, we are dear friends, me and Paul...*dear* friends. He put me here. That’s why he calls me a fellow worker. He put me here]— also to Apphia [Honey, he includes you.] our sister and Archippus [Archie! Calls you a fellow soldier] our fellow soldier—and to the church that meets in your home:
Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.”

So what does he say next? What do you think Paul’s gonna say to his old friend about his new friend? What is he gonna say to the slave owner about his former slave who robbed him blind? And more



importantly, what is the responsibility of Christian people to sort out their relational fractures? When someone wrongs you, how should you and I respond to that? And when we wrong others, what kinds of lengths should we go to to try to make it right? How should the gospel of Jesus and the knowledge that we've been forgiven affect the way that you and I act toward one another as Christian brothers and sisters now? In our business dealings, and in our relationships like marriage and family and baseball and hockey and...how should it affect that? Well that's what Philemon is about—it's what the book's about. This little book is gonna help us. Twenty five verses, four weeks, today I'm just dealing with those first three verses alright? So you need to come back if you want answers. But this week I want to raise three questions that are raised at the beginning of the letter, that I think we need to deal with kind of as a preamble alright?

Number one: Why does Paul call himself a prisoner of Jesus? Number two: What can we learn from churches meeting in houses? Third, the one I'm gonna spend most my time on: Does the Bible endorse slavery? Right? Stories about a former slave being sent by an apostle of Jesus Christ back to his slave owner, um what?

So,

1. Why does Paul call himself a prisoner of Jesus?
2. What can we learn from churches meeting in houses?
3. Does the Bible endorse slavery?

[Why Does Paul Call Himself a Prisoner of Jesus?]

Alright, here's the first of those, why does Paul call himself a prisoner of Jesus? You saw that right? That's like the first thing he said. Philemon 1,

“Paul, a *prisoner* of Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother, To Philemon our dear friend and fellow worker...”

The prisoner of Christ Jesus. I had the opportunity a number of years ago to meet some pastors in Southeast Asia, who all had less than their full complement of fingers. Was weird, you'd shake their hands, and the first guy would be missing his pinkie, and then the next guy would be missing his next two, one guy was just missing his middle finger. I finally ask the missionary there, why is it that every one of these pastors in this region have less than all their digits? And the missionary said, “Uh.. so here's the thing. These men all come from an area of closed country to the gospel and so these guys they go and they quietly proclaim the gospel on houses, and in little meeting places, and it's not uncommon for the police to find out about it. And to get an informant there, somebody who sort of, you know sneakily undercover and they report it to the police. And then they—the police—break into the meeting, they would often arrest everyone, but they're particularly interested in arresting the pastor. They'll take that pastor, put him in a hole in the ground, where he'll be for sometime, six months, no trial. But they'll come to that pastor on a regular occasion, and they will say, 'You need to recant for everything you said. Publicly recant. Go out and tell all these people that what you said was



a lie.' And of course these guys are like, 'No. We're not gonna do that.' 'Alright, will you do it if we take your fingers from you?' And they would hold the snippers over the digits and say, 'Will you recant?' The fact that these men don't have all their fingers, Jeff, is a sign that they're faithful."

Now, can you imagine yourself being in their position. You're going to preach in a closed country, you know it's dangerous, and in the middle of your talk about Jesus, the doors of the church break open and there they are, armed guards, they come and take you into the prison and they hold the snippers to your fingers. While they're holding the snipper to your finger, if I were to ask you, "Of whom are you a prisoner today?" What would be your answer? You'd say, "The government! This dude! Government! You know what you'd probably *not* say? "I'm a prisoner of Jesus." And yet that's exactly what Paul's doing here! He's under house arrest, under the authority of Rome, they had broken in on him and tried to stop him from proclaiming the gospel of Jesus, and yet when he looks at the circumstance that he's in, he says: "I'm a prisoner, not of Rome, not of this particular guy, but of Jesus Christ." is his viewpoint by the way of his imprisonment in other places. The book of Philippians was written roughly around the same time the book of Philemon was written. And listen to the way Paul describes the same imprisonment that he talks about in this line, I'm a prisoner for Christ Jesus. When in Philippians 1:12, listen to what he says,

"Now I want you to know [you Philippian church], brothers and sisters, that what has happened to me [my imprisonment namely] has actually served to advance the gospel. As a result, it has become clear throughout the whole palace guard and to everyone else that I am in chains for Christ. And because of my chains, most of the brothers and sisters have become confident in the Lord and dare all the more to proclaim the gospel without fear."

In other words, "Listen, isn't it amazing that God has done? That putting me in prison, he has provided me a live audience who are forced to be here to whom I can preach all the time? Like it's the same guy! He shows up everyday, and then another guy shows up for the night duty. So I start by preaching to the first dude. And then they give me another dude. And I do the same sermon. And then I'd do it over and over and over and over again. Isn't this phenomenal? So the gospel is going forth among a bunch of these guards, who would never be reached otherwise. *And...* while I'm in here, there are people outside the doors of this prison, in the churches who are feeling themselves a little bit, right? In terms of their preaching, 'Oh.. they're gonna get Paul. I'm gonna proclaim more boldly!' So my imprisonment here, is furthering the gospel here *and* out there! Prisoner of Jesus. Praise God!" You see what he does here? He sees the purpose in it all. And it frames his experience of the circumstance. Totally interesting, at the end of the book Philippians. Philippians 4:22, listen to what Paul says,

"All God's people here send you greetings, especially those who belong to Caesar's household."

So some of these guys gave in, right? The people—guards! Listen this is the way it works. God does the things he does in your life and my life with a purpose and a plan.



And you need to be repeatedly reminded of that over and over again lest you act like an atheist. You see, there's a difference between seeing your circumstances as an atheist, and seeing your circumstance as a Christian. If you see your circumstances as an atheist, what you say is, "Man...this whole thing stinks. And that guy's at fault, and that person's at fault..." And those might be right, but there's no guiding principle or plan in any of this, you're just hurtling through space, just a victim of 'fate' — whatever that is—and it's all gonna end, and not in justice on those who persecuted others, but just in dead nothingness. You're gonna be eaten by worms! Yay...That's the view. And so, you get <angry voice> angry and frustrated </voice> about everything that's going on! How dare this thing happened to me in this moment!

And yet if you're a Christian, you get angry and frustrated by the injustices around you, and that are perpetrated against you. They're evil and wicked and terrible things. God hates them too. And yet you also know that all of those things are filtered through the hands of a God who loves you. You are a prisoner of Jesus. Even in your cancer. Even in your financial difficulty. Even in your family dynamics. Even in all of that, those things are in your life filtered through the hands of a God who loves you and seeks your good. You need to remind yourself of this over and over again.

I was riding in a plane a little while ago. It was the worst flight I've ever taken. Because the little kid who was sitting behind me and the guy who was sitting next to me right? This little kid was kicking every <grunts> [kicks and flails]...everything. He actually, a boy, his sister—and the younger sister who was just addicted to the iPad. And a boy, his sister, a mother and a father. The mother had been looking after the kids I think, for the entire or very long journey, they come from somewhere else right? And we're flying back to Vancouver. So I think their second or third flight. Just overheard them talking about it. The father was totally disengaged you know, as fathers do. If I had that kid, I'd be disengaged too. Anyway, so he was...kid, guy sitting next to me was so...<grunts> "Urgh, I'm..just gonna... yell at this." And I said, "Well you..." and he wasn't my friend, the guy sitting next to me, I just met him right? "You can't.. don't yell at him... it's just not gonna work." but anyway he kept kicking. And it was terrible. And the kid kept complaining the whole time! <high pitch voice> "I hate this! <crying and whining>" </voice>. And the mother just finally said, <yells> "I'm done!" And she put her headphones on and put her head against the thing [leans to the side]. And the father was like, who'd been totally disengaged was just like, "What? Oh, what? I guess I'm in." Right? You know... She just tapped this guy in. And he grabbed this boy and he put him on his lap and he's sitting and he's holding him, and he reasons with this kid, who's been freaking out this whole time. He says, "Listen, have I ever taken you anywhere in your entire life that has caused you harm? Have I ever done anything to you that has hurt you? Ever? Can't you ultimately trust me? I know you're scared and you've not experienced stuff like this before, but can't you just trust me that I got a plan." And kid...<huffs and puffs> "Yeah...Yeah..." And he calmed down. Eventually we got to the gate, I remember the son, the boy, ran off the jetway, right past me. We got out. Just in front of me. And he ran right past me, and he ran out the gate, and there were grandparents there and he's hugging and running around, he's thrilled, right?



And I think about that all the time, because I feel what that kid...I understand his viewpoint on the matter. Cause from his point of view, he's just hurtling through the air in a large metal tube, and he doesn't know where he's going, how it's getting there. And I'm sure his parents have told him, "Look. At the end of this, it's gonna be really great! Grandma and grandpa are gonna be there!" But that doesn't really change the moment as much. I feel that. I feel like in my life I'm hurtling through the space in a large metal tube and I don't know where it's going and I know what God says about my future. That you are going to reach the place that's better than any grandma or grandpa. But in the moment, when it doesn't make any sense. <frustrated yelling> kicking the people in front of me and everyone around me..that's what I'm like! And you know the only thing that ever really gives me any kind of peace in the midst of it? Is when my father pulls me on his knee and says, "Have I ever led you astray? Jeff, have I ever, ever put you on a situation that ultimately caused you harm and not good?" You need to hear that again. We're prisoners *of Jesus*.

[What Can We Learn from Churches Meeting in Houses?]

Here's verse one and two, Philemon 1-2,

"Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother, To Philemon our dear friend and fellow worker—also to Apphia our sister and Archippus our fellow soldier—and to the church that meets in your home..."

That was a common thing for wealthy people in the early church to do: was to host the church...in their home. There are those who come in after this and said, "Oh that basically means that every church that doesn't meet in homes is unfaithful. That actually what God wants all of us to be in homes." There are people today even in the house church movement who have made that argument. There is a difference between a Biblical prescription and a Biblical description. There's nowhere in scripture that point to this, "Thou shalt meet in thy neighbour's home..." It's not there. What you do have, is a description of people meeting in homes and there's a reason for that. Because persecution was a big deal. One of the best ways to avoid persecution was to not put a big building on the side of the road and says [points] "Church meets here at 10AM" Right? That's not a way to do it. But...if you meet quietly in people's homes...eventually churches outgrew the homes and they ended up building buildings and they were in settings where thank God the governments were far more amenable to their presence, so...there's that.

But the point that I'm making here is, there seems to be, in the New Testament, an understanding among wealthier people that they have a larger obligation to the local church. They say "I have more, so I have a responsibility to use the more to serve more." So you find this all throughout the New Testament. You have of course people meeting in the homes of wealthier people. Jesus and his disciples in Luke 8 are supported by wealthier women who are saying, "Listen, we'll pay for this entire mission trip, everywhere we go." This group of women who have been freed, in some cases, from demon possession. But had means of their own and were using this to worship the Lord. You see Barnabas in Acts 4, he's a wealthy landowner and he sells some of his property and he brings that



money and he lays it at the apostles' feet, cause he says, "Listen, there's people on this congregation who need it the money than I need the land. And God's blessed me more, so I'm gonna bless them. I have a responsibility cause I have more to use the more to serve more." Or, to him who much has been given, much is required. To him who much has been given, much is required. You know that. Right? You know that, in every other area of your life.

When I was in college, I remember moving people. Every Saturday I had to move my friends out of one house to another. What is up with college dudes moving all the time? I'm in my 40's now, I haven't moved somebody in like 15 years...praise Jesus! Like, I mean...And I never bought a pickup truck because I didn't want to be that guy who they call them "Um... do you have a truck? Come on over on Saturday. There's pizza in it." You know? Nah. The pizza's gonna be paying it...Okay. But you've done that, many of you have done that. You show up, if you're a larger guy like me, they usually call and ask you, "You look like you could lift a couple of boxes, come into my house." Right? You show up, and they have a room full boxes...I got to one house, one time to help one of a friend move, and he hadn't even packed any of this stuff up. And I turn around and said, "I'm out of here. You do this first, then I'll come back." But there usually there's a big room full of boxes, and you go in there and it's usually a bunch of big guys and then some of their girlfriends, or wives or whatever. And they show up as well, and they want to help out. So the girls come in and they grab a box usually. Right? And they carry a box out. And then you follow and you're like, "Oh man... if you carry one, I gotta do like, five here." Right? You try to do as many as you can, even if you're crushed under the weight of it, you're fine. But there's always a guy, is there not? who spends the entire last week in front of a mirror working on his pipes, right? And he shows up, and he carries that one box out! And you're like, "What is—is this all for show? [motions the whole arm] This whole thing here?" Yes. Right? [audience laughs] And you're like, what's going on in your heart there? To whom much has been given, much is required! Yes? Right. What is true in moving your friend, your college friends, is true in life. And your responsibility brothers and sisters to the church of Christ. God has placed many of you in the midst of *this* church, with an expectation that what he has given you, will be filtered through you to help the more. Similarly, that we as a church have a responsibility toward the rest of our world. Even blessed greatly, and we as a church have a responsibility to, we who have been given more, to use the more to serve more.

[Does the Bible Endorse Slavery?]

Alright, third one then. Third question: Does the Bible endorse slavery? Cause the book is essentially about a guy who runs away, yay! He's out of slavery! He meets a Paul, he becomes a Christian! Yay! And Paul says, "Go back." Um...sorry, what? Go back to what? To the slave owner? What are you, nuts, Paul? Are you for slavery Paul? Cause there's in other places that you say "Slaves, obey your master." Like, you're for it? What do we do with a Bible that seems to sound that way? In fact there's a guy named, who calls himself "Horus Gilgamesh", not his real name. And he was a former Christian and has now become an ardent skeptic and he wrote up a little children's Bible called the *Awkward Moments Bible*. Listen, do not buy this for your children. I'm not showing it so that you'll go out and buy it. It's basically to make fun of the Bible, say "All you guys in your children's story book Bibles



always cut the edges off of the stories. You do know that the Bible has contains all sorts of very awkward things.” So here’s one. [Shows screen; at 30:46] Here’s a picture of what he perceives the Bible to say about slavery. So you see Jesus there on the slave ship, on the shores of Africa, whipping all the African slaves as they go on board the ship. The tagline of the Bible is: Don’t blame me, it’s in the Bible. He wrote about this picture he said:

“What kind of a God would issue a commandment against coveting another man’s property but not against making another human being a piece of property in the first place? What kind of loving God stands by as millions of His own children are bought, sold, and slaughtered — justified by his own laws? What kind of Son of God would allow the father of the early church to utter a phrase such as, ‘Slaves, obey your masters...’”

There’s a half truth in there. Yeah. What do we do with the Bible’s take on slavery? What do we do with the fact that Paul tells Onesimus to go back to Philemon? So here, as we finish, I want to give you three facts about the Bible and slavery. Three facts about the Bible and slavery. Here’s the first one,

1. Slavery in the Bible is quite different from slavery in the New World.

The system that the Bible’s talking about of slavery, is different than the system of slavery in the New World. First of all, it’s not race based. So the picture you see of Jesus, you know, whipping African slaves, as if Jesus were the great slave trader in the African slave trade. That’s just not the case at all. That’s not even close to the case. Slavery in the New World, is far different. It was race based, involved kidnapping people from one continent enslaving them on another. That’s not what took place. Most people who were slaves in the ancient world, were there by their own choosing. By choosing I mean, they had gotten in some financial difficulty, and they had sold themselves instead of declaring bankruptcy and basically starving to death, they sold themselves into the hands of the person they owed money to. And when they paid that off, they would be what we call ‘manumitted’ freed. Ninety percent of the people living on the Italian peninsula, where Rome is, ninety percent of the people living there at one time in their lives had been slaves. And slavery was better than destitution. Often times slaves were treated as possessions, which means of course, that people cared for them a little bit more. Like, if I hired you and things go bad, I can just fire you. And you can go die over there. But if you’re a slave, see I’ve invested something in you, and I can sell you as a possession, so I’m going to take greater care of my belonging. Like you take better care of the car you own than the rental you get, yes? And so they get healthcare, and a shelter, and exploitation was a reality and it happened. But advancement also happened. So we have stories in the Bible of Joseph being sold into slavery and eventually becoming the second in command of all of Egypt. We have the parable of the talents, where Jesus tells the story of a rich landowner who’s gonna go on a trip and he leaves three guys in charge. Those guys are called *doulos*—slaves. This one gets 5 million dollars to work with, that guy gets 2 million to work with, and that guy gets 1 million to work with. They’re all slaves in high ranking positions in the household. Lots of responsibility.



Now I don't want to make it sound though that like slavery "It was a really great deal! You should be a slave too!" People still owned each other. So the question still persists, but what about the way the Bible talks about that? We expect it just to condemn it outright! Because that's the way God feels about it right?

2. The Old Testament law does not condone, but regulates slavery.

So fact number two, the Old Testament law does not condone, people will argue that it condones slavery. The Old Testament law doesn't condone slavery, it regulates slavery. So in Exodus 21, you get things said, listen 'kidnapping slaves is forbidden', so somebody can sell themselves into your possession, but you can't...don't go out and steal people. If you abuse people, if you hit a slave in the eye or in the mouth and they lose a tooth, they get to go free. And you have to take care of the tooth. Hebrew slaves were freed every seven years. So there's an automatic out day. So there's all these laws cutting the edges off of the harsh slavery conditions in the ancient world. But the question still remains, why not a law that says "Don't ever do it"? And don't those laws in the Old Testament just kind of give tacit approval to the fact that God's heart really is against slavery? God's heart is "Yeah..it's okay. It's not a big deal."

Actually there's some help we can get in answering that question in Matthew 19, in a conversation that Jesus has with some Pharisees. The Pharisees come up to him and they want to have a conversation about divorce. Listen to what they say, Matthew 19:3-9,

"Some Pharisees came to him to test him. They asked, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any and every reason?" [Like, can just divorce for any reason at all? His response here is really good] "Haven't you read," he replied, "that at the beginning the Creator 'made them male and female,' [He's essentially saying, "Hey you religious leaders are really smart and they're experts in the law, in your reading of God's Bible...did you ever get as far as Genesis 1?" **Haven't you read that at the beginning the Creator 'made them male and female,'**] and said, 'For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh'? So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore ["Here's my answer," Jesus says] what God has joined together, let no one separate." "Why then," they asked, "did Moses [in Deuteronomy] *command* that a man give his wife a certificate of divorce and send her away?" [See? Moses commanded that we divorce our wives!] Jesus replied, "Moses [note the word] *permitted* you to divorce your wives [Why?] because your hearts were hard. But it was not this way from the beginning. I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another woman commits adultery."

See, guys, listen. You're not paying attention. That you're focusing on the laws that God gave after the fall, where God was trying to regulate your hardness of heart! If you want to know what God really feels about a thing? Go before the fall and ask yourself the question, "Does God love divorce?" there. With Adam and Eve, did he say "You know Adam, if you just get sick of her just kick her out." Is that



what he says there? So in other words, the Old Testament laws are there to curb hardness of heart. But God's genuine intent, his real heart on matters, is found in the creation account.

So folks, does God like slavery in the created order? Did he create Adam and Eve and their slave Joe? Were people ever intended to own other people? No. Whoa, why does God permit it in...or some say "command" it? He doesn't command it, he permits it. Why? Hardness of heart. God's never loved slavery.

3. The New Testament condemns slavery and subversively seeks its destruction.

And you find this, in my third finally, my third fact. You find this in the New Testament. The New Testament *condemns* slavery and subversively seeks its destruction. So 1 Corinthians 12:13,

"For we were all baptized by one Spirit so as to form one body—whether Jews or Gentiles, slave or free—and we were all given the one Spirit to drink."

Doesn't matter where you're from, doesn't matter your socioeconomic standing, doesn't matter your gender, doesn't matter anything like that, you all have equal access to God by one Spirit. The Holy Spirit fills a slave as he much does as a free man. You're brothers and sisters in Christ—all one family. Baptized into one Spirit. And you say, "But what's God's heart in the New Testament about slavery itself? And about people who do enslaving?" 1 Timothy 1:9-10,

"We also know that the law is made not for the righteous but for lawbreakers and rebels, the ungodly and sinful, the unholy and irreligious [Okay, so describe, who are we talking about? We're talking about unholy and irreligious], for those who kill their fathers or mothers [Yeah. They'd be unholy.], for murderers [Yep. Okay.], for the sexually immoral, for those practicing homosexuality, for slave traders [The Greek word there means 'enslavers', anyone who enslaves another.] and liars and perjurers..."

I'm gonna give away the book of Philemon just for a second. The end, I'm not gonna leave you in a cliffhanger. Paul writes the letter, hands it to Onesimus, he delivers it to Philemon. And at the end of it, Philemon 15, he says,

"Perhaps the reason he [Onesimus] was separated from you [Philemon] for a little while was that you might have him back forever—*no longer* as a slave, but *better* than a slave, as a dear brother."

What is he saying? Free him, Philemon. But why isn't there a command in the New Testament that says, "Get rid. All of you Christians, get rid of every slave right now! Be done with it completely!" Well, N.T. Wright tries to argue and answer to that question, he says,



“Why did Paul not order all Christian slave-owners to release all their slaves, rather than profit from an unjust social structure? Why not protest against the whole dehumanizing system?... What alternatives were actually open to Paul? Demanding release of all slaves would, without a doubt, have done more harm than good, making life harder for Christian slaves, and drawing upon the young church exactly the wrong sort of attention from the authorities. And it would have been totally ineffective: one might as well, in modern Western society, protest against the mortgage system. Even if all Christians of Paul’s day were suddenly to release their slaves, it is by no means clear that the slaves themselves, or society in general, would benefit: a large body of people suddenly unemployed in the ancient world might not enjoy their freedom as much as they would imagine... Paul’s method is subtler. Like Jesus, his way of changing the world is to plant a grain of mustard seed, which, inconspicuous at first, grows into a spreading tree. And in the meantime he teaches slaves and masters to treat themselves, and each other, as human beings.”

You see that image? He subverts it. He plants a seed and expects it to germinate and grow in the communities of Christians so much that slavery just can’t be done anymore, cause I’m not gonna enslave my brother in Christ. And guys, it worked. Do not let anyone tell you that slavery in the New World was abolished apart from Christian faithfulness. Just do your history here. Just do your history. William Wilberforce was a Christian man who saw the African slave trade, read his Bible, and say “That shouldn’t be!”. And he raised up groups of others who would follow him to abolish it in England. Frederick Douglas, former slave in the United States, who wrote, his writing proliferated all over the place. This man Frederick Douglas was a preacher! And he was calling America to repent. “Christian America” to repent for their hatefulness. “Read the Bible!” He was saying. “See what God says about the unjust. And *this* is unjust!” And Martin Luther King? I dare you to read his stuff and come away saying, “This guy didn’t know his Bible.” It’s filled with Bible! His letters from a Birmingham jail are just expositions of scripture. Cause here’s the fact, faithful Bible saturated Christianity was the force that destroyed the New World slave trade. Faithful Bible saturated Christianity destroyed the slave trade. So the question that you’re asking, “Does the Bible condone slavery?” Nah. It kills it. It kills it.

You should come back next time. Imagine how much more there is here. It’s three verses! Alright. Let’s pray.

Father, I’m so thankful for your grace. I’m thankful Father for well, your Word and the work that is done in our world. It has shaped our world in a profound way and I pray Lord, that more and more people’s hearts would be warmed to you and to your Word to understanding it rightly. I’m thankful Father for the work of organizations like IJM and others who are actively seeking to thwart the thriving slave trade of our day. We pray Father that we too would take apart, not just, certainly in our minds against the racism that so quickly dwells there and easily dwells there. But also toward the views that we have toward those around the world who are under the hand of oppression. Help us to be prisoners of Jesus, walking lock step with him. We’re thankful for all these things and ask your Spirit to lead us now, in Jesus’ name, Amen.