

Doctrine of Slavery

1. **A Definite Distinction.** The Biblical doctrine on slavery is bound up in the general concept of service translated by several Hebrew and Greek words.
 - Hebrew `abad to serve, work
 sharat to attend
 - Greek diakonia, attendance
 leitourgia public function, as of a priest
 douleuo to be a slave
 latreuo to minister

2. A distinction is to be recognized between a person who was a bond-servant and someone who was a slave (Greek: *doulos*). The bond-servant and the slave were then to be distinguished from a hired servant (Greek: *diakonos*) who was not a slave in any sense. Although there were persons employed for wages called hirelings (Mal. 3:5; John 10:12), the servants of the Israelites, as of other ancient peoples, consisted chiefly of slaves—men and women servants—held as property.

3. Ways to Enslave Others. There were several ways the Israelites could acquire a slave.
 - Individuals could be purchased from a neighboring nation or from foreign residents in Canaan. *Leviticus 25:44 Both thy bondmen, and thy bondmaids, which thou shalt have, shall be of the heathen that are round about you; of them shall ye buy bondmen and bondmaids.*
 - Those who were taken captive in war could be enslaved. *Genesis 14:21 And the king of Sodom said unto Abram, Give me the persons, and take the goods to thyself. Numbers 31:9 And the children of Israel took all the women of Midian captives, and their little ones, and took the spoil of all their cattle, and all their flocks, and all their goods.*
 - Children of slaves born in the house of the master would be considered a slave. *Genesis 17:12 And he that is eight days old shall be circumcised among you, every man child in your generations, he that is born in the house, or bought with money of any stranger, which is not of thy seed. 13 He that is born in thy house, and he that is bought with thy money, must needs be circumcised: and my covenant shall be in your flesh for an everlasting covenant.*

4. Having been slaves themselves the Hebrews were sensitive to the issue of slavery and established a merciful system when compared to that of other nations.

5. While slavery was not a Mosaic institution per se, it was regulated by statute with the purpose and tendency of mitigating its evils and of restricting its duration.

6. One source of slavery condemned by Moses and held in great disrespect was the stealing of individuals to enslave them and make merchandise of them.

- *Deuteronomy 24:7 If a man be found stealing any of his brethren of the children of Israel, and maketh merchandise of him, or selleth him; then that thief shall die; and thou shalt put evil away from among you.*
 - *Exodus 21:16 And he that stealeth a man, and selleth him, or if he be found in his hand, he shall surely be put to death.*
 - *1 Timothy 1:10 For whoremongers, for them that defile themselves with mankind, for menstealers, for liars, for perjured persons, and if there be any other thing that is contrary to sound doctrine;*
7. With regard to the kind of service that might be exacted by Hebrew masters from their servants, a distinction was made between those who were of their own brethren and foreigners.
 8. Hebrew Bond-Service. Because the Israelites were the servants of God they were not to be treated, when they became servants to their brethren, as bond-servants but as hired servants and sojourners. Their masters were to rule over them with kindness. *Leviticus 25:39 "And if thy brother that dwelleth by thee be waxen poor, and be sold unto thee; thou shalt not compel him to serve as a bondservant."*
 9. There were several ways a Hebrew might become the bond-servant of his brethren:
 - A Hebrew who was unable to maintain himself as an independent citizen might voluntarily enslave himself but only for a six year period. *Exodus 21:2 If thou buy an Hebrew servant, six years he shall serve: and in the seventh he shall go out free for nothing.*
 - A thief who could not make restitution could be enslaved in order to labor for restitution. *Exodus 22:3 If the sun be risen upon him, there shall be blood shed for him; for he should make full restitution; if he have nothing, then he shall be sold for his theft.*
 - The children of a Hebrew servant became, by virtue of their birth, servants of the master. *Exodus 21:4 If his master have given him a wife, and she have born him sons or daughters; the wife and her children shall be her master's, and he shall go out by himself.*
 10. Although it is not clearly stated in the Law of Moses that a man might be claimed personally and with his children sold by his creditors, in fact the person and children of a debtor were claimed.
 - *2 Kings 4:1 Now there cried a certain woman of the wives of the sons of the prophets unto Elisha, saying, Thy servant my husband is dead; and thou knowest that thy servant did fear the LORD: and the creditor is come to take unto him my two sons to be bondmen.*

- *Nehemiah 5:5 Yet now our flesh is as the flesh of our brethren, our children as their children: and, lo, we bring into bondage our sons and our daughters to be servants, and some of our daughters are brought unto bondage already: neither is it in our power to redeem them; for other men have our lands and vineyards (cf. Isaiah 50:1; Job 24:9).*
11. From Leviticus 25:39, 47, it may be understood that while an impoverished man might sell himself it was only to work off his debt till the Jubilee year.
- *Leviticus 25:39 And if thy brother that dwelleth by thee be waxen poor, and be sold unto thee; thou shalt not compel him to serve as a bondservant.*
 - *Leviticus 25:47 And if a sojourner or stranger wax rich by thee, and thy brother that dwelleth by him wax poor, and sell himself unto the stranger or sojourner by thee, or to the stock of the stranger's family.*
12. Every Israelite, male or female, who had become a slave might be redeemed at any time by relatives. If not redeemed he was bound to receive his freedom without payment after six years' service, with a present of cattle and food.
- *Exodus 21:2 If thou buy an Hebrew servant, six years he shall serve: and in the seventh he shall go out free for nothing.*
 - *Deuteronomy 15:12 And if thy brother, an Hebrew man, or an Hebrew woman, be sold unto thee, and serve thee six years; then in the seventh year thou shalt let him go free from thee. 13 And when thou sendest him out free from thee, thou shalt not let him go away empty: 14 Thou shalt furnish him liberally out of thy flock, and out of thy floor, and out of thy winepress: of that wherewith the LORD thy God hath blessed thee thou shalt give unto him. 15 And thou shalt remember that thou wast a bondman in the land of Egypt, and the LORD thy God redeemed thee: therefore I command thee this thing to day.*
13. If a slave brought a wife with him into service, she received her freedom with him; if he received a wife from his master, then she and her children remained in bondage though he went free.
- *Exodus 21:3 If he came in by himself, he shall go out by himself: if he were married, then his wife shall go out with him.*
 - *Jeremiah 34:8 This is the word that came unto Jeremiah from the LORD, after that the king Zedekiah had made a covenant with all the people which were at Jerusalem, to proclaim liberty unto them; 9 That every man should let his manservant, and every man his maidservant, being an Hebrew or an Hebrewess, go free; that none should serve himself of them, to wit, of a Jew his brother. 10 Now when all the princes, and all the people, which had entered into the covenant, heard that every one should let his manservant, and every one his maidservant, go free, that none should serve themselves of them any more, then they obeyed, and let them go.*

14. Respecting a female Israelite sold to another Israelite as housekeeper and concubine, specific conditions prevailed.

- The female bondservant could not "*go free as the male slaves do,*" i.e., she could not leave at the termination of six years or in the year of Jubilee, if her master was willing to fulfill the object for which he had purchased her. *Exodus 21:7 And if a man sell his daughter to be a maidservant, she shall not go out as the menservants do.*
- If the female bondservant did not please her lord she was to be immediately redeemed, not sold to a foreign people. *Exodus 21:8 If she please not her master, who hath betrothed her to himself, then shall he let her be redeemed: to sell her unto a strange nation he shall have no power, seeing he hath dealt deceitfully with her.*
- If the master decided to betrothed her to be married to his son, he was honor bound to make such provision for her as he would for one of his own daughters. *Exodus 21:9 And if he have betrothed her unto his son, he shall deal with her after the manner of daughters.*
- If either the master or his son, having married the bond-servant, took a second wife, it should not be to the prejudice of the first, either in respect to support, clothing, or cohabitation. *Exodus 21:10 If he take him another wife; her food, her raiment, and her duty of marriage, shall he not diminish.*
- In failure of these, the bond-servant wife was to be freed without money. *Exodus 21:11 And if he do not these three unto her, then shall she go out free without money.*

15. If a Hebrew bond-servant, from love for master or wife and children, preferred not to accept freedom in the seventh year, but wished to remain in his master's house, he was brought before the elders and had his ear bored against a door or post with an awl in token of lifelong servitude.

- *Exodus 21:6 Then his master shall bring him unto the judges; he shall also bring him to the door, or unto the door post; and his master shall bore his ear through with an aul; and he shall serve him for ever.*
- *Deuteronomy 15:17 Then thou shalt take an aul, and thrust it through his ear unto the door, and he shall be thy servant for ever. And also unto thy maidservant thou shalt do likewise.*

16. The under girding principle in allowing some form of self-imposed bond-servitude was that self interest, love for another, and/or personal allegiance to a kind master were prized more highly than personal freedom.

17. The custom of reducing fellow Hebrews to bond servitude ceased following the Babylonian captivity mainly because most Hebrews were by then reduced to some form of legal, and or political slavery as war captives at different period by various people.

- Phoenicians (Joel 3:6), the Philistines Amos 1:6
- Syrians 1 Macc. 3:41; 2 Macc. 8:11
- Egyptians Josephus Ant. 12.2.2-3
- and the Romans.

18. Hebrew Slavery under a Foreign Master. Should a Hebrew become the servant of a "stranger," meaning a non-Hebrew, the servitude could be terminated only in two ways, by the arrival of the year of Jubilee or by the repayment to the master of the purchase money paid for the servant, after deducting the value of the services already rendered. The estimate was based upon the pay of a hired laborer (Lev 25:47-55).

19. Non-Hebrew Slaves. The source of non-Hebrew slaves and their legal standing were treated in the Pentateuch; information concerning the procedures for freeing them comes from extra biblical sources.

20. Sources for Becoming a Slave as a Non-Hebrew.

- War Captives. The majority of non-Hebrew slaves were war captives, either of the Canaanites who had survived the general extermination of their race under Joshua, or such as were conquered from the other surrounding nations (Num 31:26-28).
- Slave Traders. Besides these, many were obtained by purchase from foreign slave dealers (Lev 25:44-45); and others may have been resident foreigners who were reduced to this state either by poverty or crime.
- Born into Slavery. The children of slaves remained slaves, being the class described as "born in the house" (Gen 14:14; 17:12; Eccl 2:7), and hence the number was likely to increase as time went on. The average value of a slave appears to have been thirty shekels Exodus 21:32 "If the ox shall push a manservant or a maidservant; he shall give unto their master thirty shekels of silver, and the ox shall be stoned."

21. The Legal Standing of a Slave. The slave is described as the "possession" of his master, apparently with a special reference to the power that the latter had of disposing of him to his heirs as he would any other article of personal property (Lev 25:45-46); the slave is also described as his master's "property" i.e., as representing a certain money value. Exodus 21:21 "Notwithstanding, if he continue a day or two, he shall not be punished: for he is his money."

22. Freeing the Slave. That the slave might be set free appears in Ex 21:26-27. As to the methods by which this might be effected we are told nothing in the Bible; but the rabbinites specify the following four methods:

- redemption by a money payment,
- a bill or ticket of freedom,
- testamentary disposition, or
- any act that implied freedom, such as making a slave one's heir.

23. Protection of the Slave. Both respecting the Israelite and the stranger, provision was made for the protection of his person.

- *Leviticus 24:17 And he that killeth any man shall surely be put to death.*
- *Leviticus 24:22 Ye shall have one manner of law, as well for the stranger, as for one of your own country: for I am the LORD your God.*
- *Exodus 21:20 And if a man smite his servant, or his maid, with a rod, and he die under his hand; he shall be surely punished.*

24. A minor personal injury, such as the loss of an eye or a tooth, was to be recompensed by giving the servant his liberty.

- *Exodus 21:26 And if a man smite the eye of his servant, or the eye of his maid, that it perish; he shall let him go free for his eye's sake. 27 And if he smite out his manservant's tooth, or his maidservant's tooth; he shall let him go free for his tooth's sake.*

25. The slave was to be allowed to worship.

- The male slave was to be circumcised. *Genesis 17:12 "And he that is eight days circumcised among you, every man child in your generations, he that is born in the house, or bought with money of any stranger, which is not of thy seed."*
- The slave, male or female, was entitled to partake of the paschal sacrifice. *Exodus 12:44 But every man's servant that is bought for money, when thou hast circumcised him, then shall he eat thereof.*
- The slave was to participate in the other religious festivals.

Deuteronomy 12:12 And ye shall rejoice before the Lord your God, ye, and your sons, and your daughters, and your menservants, and your maidservants, and the Levite that is within your gates; forasmuch as he hath no part nor inheritance with you.

Deuteronomy 12:18 But thou must eat them before the Lord thy God in the place which the Lord thy God shall choose, thou, and thy son, and thy daughter, and thy manservant, and thy maidservant, and the Levite that is within thy gates: and thou shalt rejoice before the Lord thy God in all that thou puttest thine hands unto.

- The slave was to enjoy the rest of the Sabbath.

Exodus 20:11 For in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that in them is, and rested the seventh day: wherefore the LORD blessed the sabbath day, and hallowed it.

Deuteronomy 5:14 But the seventh day is the sabbath of the LORD thy God: in it thou shalt not do any work, thou, nor thy son, nor thy daughter, nor thy manservant, nor thy maidservant, nor thine ox, nor thine ass, nor any of thy cattle, nor thy stranger that is within thy gates; that thy manservant and thy maidservant may rest as well as thou.

A Brief Comparison and Contrast Between Biblical Slavery and American Slavery

1. Within the boundaries of Biblical slavery, stealing men in order to sell them was condemned (Deuteronomy 24:7; Exodus 21:16; 1 Timothy 1:10). In America slavery was condoned and justified. Many reasons were given why Christians should have supported slavery.

Biblical Reasons

- The patriarchs such as Abraham held slaves with God's approval (Genesis 21:9-10).
- Canaan, the brother of Ham was made a slave to his brothers (Genesis 9:24-27).
- The Ten Commandments mentions slavery twice without condemning it (Exodus 20:10, 17).
- Jesus never spoke against slavery.
- The apostle Paul commands Christians to obey their masters (Ephesians 6:5-8).
- Paul returned a runaway slave to his master (Philemon 12).

Charitable and Evangelist Reasons

- Slavery removed people from lands engaged in sorcery, witchcraft and idolatry.
- Slavery brought people to a land where the gospel was preached and the master could instruct the person in the Christian faith.
- Under slavery people were treated with great kindness. There was a paternalistic responsibility that slave owners felt.
- Slaves were treated with greater grace than workers in northern factories.
- Slaves would not know how to handle freedom or how to provide for themselves. The kindest response was to endure the "*Peculiar Institution.*"

Social Reasons for Slavery

- As God had ordained a subordinate role in life for females so He had ordained a subordinate role for slaves (cf. Ephesians 5:22; 1 Timothy 2:11-15).
- Through the institution of slavery God was graciously protecting a cursed race such as the descendants of Ham (Genesis 9:25) or those under divine discipline.
- Abolition would lead to social unrest. There would be bloodshed and anarchy for mobs would be free without work or bread. The French Revolution introduced a Reign of Terror. America would know such a reign if the slaves were freed.

Political Reasons

- Christians are to obey civil authorities. The civil authorities permitted and protected slavery—including the Constitution.
- Christians should focus their attention on spiritual matters and not political ones.

2. Within the boundaries of Biblical slavery every slave had legal rights and privileges. In American slavery the slave had no legal rights and only the privileges that the master allowed.

3. Within the boundaries of Biblical slavery provision was made to allow the purchase of freedom. In America freedom could be purchased at a high price in some parts of the country.
4. Within the boundaries of Biblical slavery provision was made for the protection of the person. If a slave was beaten or harmed by a master the law provided that the slave could go free (Exodus 21:26-27); and the killing of a slave called for a penalty (Exodus 21:20). No such protection existed in American slavery.
5. Within the boundaries of Biblical slavery there was to be freedom of worship and a bringing of those in bondage within the sphere of covenant blessings. In American slavery no real spiritual equality was recognized.
6. Within the boundaries of Biblical slavery slaves were allowed to secure their freedom. Under the Jewish law, no Hebrew was to be the permanent slave of another Hebrew. After six years of service, a slave was to be released (Exodus 21:2; Deuteronomy 15:12). In the Year of Jubilee, no matter how long a slave had served, he was to be released (Leviticus 25:37-43). A slave could also buy his freedom, or another person could buy his freedom for him (Lev 25:47-49). In America it would take a Civil War to set the slaves free.
7. The Bible contains warnings about the practice of slavery.
 - The prophet Amos spoke woe to Gaza and Tyre for their practices of slave-trading entire populations (Amos 1:6-9).
 - The *Book of Revelation* declares that disaster awaits those who sell slaves (Revelation 18:13).
 - As for Christians, the apostle Paul advised slaves to obey their masters (Ephesians 6:5; Colossians 3:22; Titus 2:9). Paul appealed to Philemon to receive back Onesimus, a runaway slave who was now a Christian and therefore a brother (Philem 16). Elsewhere Paul counseled believing slaves to seek freedom if they could (1 Corinthians 7:21).
8. Since slave practices were part of the culture in biblical times, the Bible contains no direct call to abolish slavery. However, the implications of the gospel, especially the ethic of love, stand in opposition to slavery. Those engaged in stealing men to sell them are listed with the wicked.
9. Both slave and free are called upon to receive the gospel of Jesus Christ. In Christ, social distinctions such as slavery no longer apply (Galatians 3:28; Colossians 3:11); in Christ all are brothers and sisters. Paul expresses the excitement of such new relationships: "*Therefore you are no longer a slave but a son, and if a son, then an heir of God through Christ*" (Galatians 4:7).
10. There is a spiritual sense in which Christians are looked upon as slaves to Christ (Romans 1:1; Titus 1:1). Once enslaved to sin those who are born again are enslaved to a new Master.

11. To commit sin is to demonstrate that sin as a ruling principle has control of one's life (John 8:34). Christ can set the soul free from this kind of spiritual slavery (John 8:36). When a person is born again there is new power to be obedient to Christ and to do righteousness (Romans 6:16-18).
12. When a person is a slave he does not manage his own life. The person who calls himself a slave of Christ acknowledges that the Savior has power over him. Christ comes to manage the life. What a blessing it is to be a slave to Jesus Christ and no longer a slave to sin.