

Thoughts on Slavery

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Preacher: Jason Webb

[0 : 00] Turn in your Bibles to Titus chapter 2, and we're continuing our study through this epistle of the apostle Paul.

The Word of God says, My intention when I began to study this passage in Titus was to get through Titus 2, 9-10, where it's Paul's instructions to the slaves.

My original intention was to say a few words about slavery and then get to the six things that Paul instructs the slaves to do. But the few words about slavery grew into more and more words about slavery.

And so tonight we're just going to talk about that. And then next time that we're together in the book of Titus, we are going to talk about Paul's instructions and what he says to slaves.

Maybe in some situations less could be said about slavery.

[2 : 30] But this is America. And I know we have a lot of visitors who are not from America, but this is America. And in America, slavery is what they call our original sin.

It's something that was baked into our very Constitution, where we said a person, a slave, was worth three-fifths of a man.

And it's something that we as a country, we as a society, the church, we are trying to figure out. We're still trying to come to grips with it.

And so I want to think about slavery. Slavery in the South. Slavery in Rome. And something about what the Bible talks about, about the whole subject.

And so it's a bit of a history. It's a bit of a comparative study. But mostly where I want to get to is to say and to show you that Jesus Christ came to destroy every bondage, except the bondage to him, where we are his slaves.

[3 : 40] So the goal, I hope, is to get to Jesus Christ and for you to appreciate. Because for everything that man has done, I think of William Wilberforce.

I think of our own abolitionists. I think of what men have done. There's been no greater man who defeated and destroyed slavery than our Lord Jesus Christ.

And he did it at every single level. So do you know what a slave narrative is? That's a question. Do you know what a slave narrative is?

If you go to the Library of Congress or even if you go to YouTube nowadays, you can hear with your own ears the voices of former enslaved people as they tell their story.

And I want to begin with a slave narrative because it's easy to think about slavery in America or slavery in general, sort of in a general sense.

[4 : 42] But slavery never happened to just generally. It happened to specific people. And so they were allowed to talk about whatever they wanted. They were allowed to talk about and explain their situations and their histories.

And it was recorded and wrote down to capture that sad bit of American history. So I do want to begin with a slave narrative. And this one is from a man named Mingo White.

And I just want you to listen to his, a little bit of Mingo's story. And it's typed out just like he said it because that's how I copied and pasted it off of the computer.

But this is what he says. I was born in Chester, South Carolina, but I was mostly raised in Alabama. When I was about four or five years old, I was loaded into a wagon with a lot more people in it.

Where I was bound, I don't know. Whatever became of my mammy or pappy, I don't know for a long time. I was just a little thing. Took away from my mammy and pappy just when I needed them the most.

[5 : 56] And later he says this, Somehow or other, us had the instinct that we was going to be free. When today's work was done, The slaves would be found locked in their cabins praying for the Lord to free them like he did the chillum of Israel.

The slaves had a way of putting a wash pot in the door of the cabin and keeping the sound in the house. I remember once old Ned White was caught praying. The drivers took him next day and carried him to the pegs.

What was four stakes drove in the ground. Ned was made to pull off everything but his pants and lay on his stomach between the pegs while somebody stropped his legs and arms to the pegs.

Then they whooped him till the blood run from him like he was a hog. They made all the hands come and see it.

And they said, Us get the same thing if we are caught. They don't allow a man to whoop a horse like they whipped us in them days.

[7 : 06] This is a little part of Mingo's story. But if you repeat that story hundreds of times and thousands of times and millions of times, That was slavery in the South.

And it was slavery to some extent in the ancient world. Was it always that bad? No, definitely not. Not. But wherever you find the institution of slavery, It always carries with it that possibility.

And so certainly there were better masters and there were worse masters. There were kinder and crueller. But this impulse to control, to dominate, to make a person, to possess, And to turn people into tools is an impulse that is natural to sinful humanity.

Humanity. It's not always so blatant, but the same thing goes on. It's not so blatant as slavery. You see it in other ways worked out.

You see it in pornography today. You see it in the early factories of the United States, Where people were treated as machines, And their dignity and their safety were given little consideration.

[8 : 16] The government had to step in because of the way factory owners were treating their employees, Where it was nothing to lose a finger or a hand to be burned, To fall, to die, To work children like slaves.

And so it was that same dark impulse to forget that people are made in the image of God. They're all in the image of God. They're not tools.

They're not merely things to be used. Slavery fits into that reality. It's a world that's not the way that God made it. And it's a world, or I should say, it's not the way it's going to be in the end.

It's only here, in the sin-cursed world, that it happens. So there were no slaves in the garden, And there will be no slaves in heaven.

There will only be free sons and daughters, And together we all will reign. Jesus will reign with all of us. So if slavery is a reality only in the fallen world, And the gospel was coming to undo it, And make the great change, And now head towards the end, Towards the last day, When there will be no slavery, The question comes up, Why doesn't Paul come to Titus, And say, Tell the masters to free their slaves.

[9 : 50] Or tell the slaves, Free yourselves. Run away. This is a sinful, wicked institution. Do what you can to be free. Why does he say, for example, In 1 Corinthians 7, Were you a slave when you were called?

Don't let it trouble you. Although, if you can gain your freedom, Do so. Why doesn't he say it? Whatever cost, become free.

Or masters, The gospel is going to put an end to slavery, So set your slaves free. Why didn't Jesus call for a slave revolt? They were unheard of.

Spartacus, The famous Roman gladiator, He did. A lot of other people did. And so why didn't Paul? Why did Paul say instead, Be subject to your masters in everything?

And part of us, Or maybe some of you, Some of us, Will say, Well, yeah, That means that slavery is fine and good. And maybe others of us say, I just don't get it.

[10 : 55] How can Paul say that? How can he just allow that to happen? We feel sort of, And I hope we feel, Like Charles Spurgeon felt.

Very interesting, What southern people thought of Charles Spurgeon. They would buy up his sermons just to burn them. There were newspaper articles where they, Or editorials where they were saying, We wish you would come over so we could string him up.

In North Carolina, At one time you could be arrested for selling his sermons. And this is what Spurgeon said, So how can Paul say what he says about slavery?

Let me give you a few, I'm going to say admittedly, Perhaps not completely satisfying thoughts, To help us to get started.

And this is what I want to say. First, That Roman slavery and southern slavery were significantly different. And so we need to understand what exactly we are looking at, When in the Bible it talks about addressing slaves, And talking about slavery.

[12 : 32] Roman slavery and southern slavery were significantly different. Now, It's a stretch to say that they were completely different, Or they had nothing in common. That's just not true, Maybe as much as it would be convenient for us if it was true.

Some of the same abuses happened in both, But they were significantly different. Roman slavery was not race-based at all. And so when we think of slavery here in America, We naturally think of race-based slavery.

And in fact, In Roman slavery, It would have been far, Far, Far, Far more common for a dark-skinned man to own a light-skinned man. Because the way the Roman slaves were attained, Was through wars of conquest in northern Europe.

So the slave trade was from the north to the south, From the Germanic people down to the more darker, Browner people.

And so they captured their slaves by the thousands, And so race had nothing to do with it at all. Any and every race, So to speak, Of men were enslaved in Rome.

[13 : 45] The whole wicked idea of a black race and a white race as separate races, Was absent in the ancient world. Men had not come yet to conceive of that particular variety of wickedness.

Yeah, There was things of racism, But not black and white racism. And there's no biological or biblical rationale for that kind of thinking.

So the Israelites in the Old Testament, And the Christians in the New Testament, Knew about black people. They were familiar with them. And I think it's a product of our culture that when we have the tendency to read the Bible, Because we are who we are, We read people like us, And they look like us.

And we find it very strange that they wouldn't be like us. Or look like us. Old Testament, New Testament, People knew and interacted with black people.

Moses' wife was a Cushite, A black woman. And Miriam and Aram had a problem with her. You can read about it in Numbers 12.1.

[14 : 56] It was one of the times that they were complaining. And they started complaining against Moses because of it. And God punished them for it. And maybe you remember what the Lord did to Miriam because of their complaining about Moses' wife.

It says he struck her with leprosy. He made her white as snow. As if to say, Light is better than dark, then fine.

That's what you can have. I'll make you white if you have such a problem. It's very likely that Aaron's grandson and Moses' great nephew, Phineas, son of Eleazar, was a very dark-skinned man.

The name Phineas means the Nubian. And his mother was likely an Egyptian. Her name, you can find it in the Bible, is an Egyptian name. It's not a normal Israelite name.

And so she probably had joined herself to the people of Israel. One scholar wrote, Phineas was a common New Kingdom Egyptian name which connotes either a person with unusually dark skin or a true African.

[16 : 05] And so it was Phineas, the Nubian, son of Eleazar, the son of Aaron, who turned the Lord's anger away when they committed their adultery and their sexual immorality in regards to Balaam's temptation.

You remember, he couldn't curse them, and so what he did was he sent that temptation, and they fell for it, and they sinned. And you remember Phineas, he took his sword and he stabbed a man and a woman in their tent with one thrust.

And it says that because he did that, God says, I will honor him and make a covenant of peace with him because he was zealous for the honor of God and made atonement for Israel.

There's other examples. Cushites, black Africans served in David's army. They were very well known as archers and messengers and spokesmen.

When Absalom revolted against David and Absalom was killed, Job sent a Cushite to go tell David, your son is dead.

[17 : 13] And so this Cushite was not some sort of menial slave. He knew how to act with royalty. He was trusted. He took this delicate news. And so that's who he was.

In the New Testament, Simeon, who was called Niger, was an elder with Paul in Antioch. It's not definite, but Niger means black. Luke already told us about the Ethiopian eunuch, a black man who was as the royal treasurer in Ethiopia or Nubia.

And now he's probably pointing out, Luke is probably pointing out, again, that this man was from Africa. Now, how he got there, we don't know for sure, but it's not like an impossible thing. People were much more moving and traveling, and the gospel was already spreading into Africa.

But Luke is being pretty clear. Africans were in the early church, and they were in places of leadership. The gospel was breaking down cultural barriers.

And you know that is part of Luke's overall story in the book of Acts, is how this gospel now begins in Jerusalem and goes to the ends of the earth. And so what I'm saying, and this is the whole point of this, in Roman slavery, slavery and skin color had nothing to do with each other.

[18 : 39] In the South, racism and slavery grew up together. There's been a lot of debate about which one was first.

And probably the best answer is that they grew up at the same time, and they used each other. Men wanted slaves for economic reasons.

And being black was as good a reason for you to deserve to be enslaved. And once you were enslaved, being inferior and ignorant and nothing better than an animal was a good justification for your ongoing enslavement.

So slavery needed racism. Slavery used racism. And racism used slavery, both as this mutually justifying system. They held each other up. And so what Paul is talking about, it didn't have that added ingredient baked into it with its extra demeaning view of the slave's intelligence, his value, his spiritual nature.

Number two, under this point, slaves in Rome were much more closer to what we call employees. Enslaved people were a huge part of the Roman workforce.

[19 : 53] Up to 40% of the population were enslaved. And they were not mere field workers. They were doctors. They were accountants. They were businessmen.

They were teachers. They were high-level government officials. They ran businesses. They had slaves underneath them. And so just because you were a slave didn't mean you didn't have an intelligence.

You didn't have a mind. You didn't have reasoning powers. You didn't have character. It didn't mean you weren't a person to trust and to love and to respect. And when you were too old to work, you were provided for.

You still lived in the home. And you were taken care of. Number three, you could buy your freedom in Rome. The expectation generally was for a grown man eventually to become free.

Now, not in any and every case, but that was the general idea. It was not a dead-end system. In fact, in the book of Acts, we meet a former slave, a now freed man.

[20 : 58] And all of the Jewish officials and Paul are all being extra polite to him and treating him with great respect.

Felix, Governor Felix in Acts 23 and 24, was a former slave whom Caesar had set free. And when he had been set free, he gave him the position of governor of Palestine.

And so obviously, that kind of thing was not happening in the South. So the whole point is this. The reality that Paul faced, yes, it was because of the fall.

There would not be wars and kidnapping and captures and all the rest if there wasn't sin. And so all slavery has to do with is either directly or indirect sin.

Sometimes it's victimization. Sometimes it's accidental poverty. Sometimes it's kidnapping and man-stealing. But in Paul's world, it was not the same dehumanizing, soul-crushing system that grew up in the South.

[22 : 09] So, with that being said, how do we think about this biblically? Again, given all of that, given the fact that the gospel is pointed towards the end, and the end is the end of all of this slavery, then why didn't Paul say outright, do this?

Set them free. Or why wasn't there a revolution? Why didn't Jesus call for a revolution? These are questions that, if you have your ears open, people are asking today.

They're coming to the Word of God, and they're saying, see, this isn't so good. Because if it was good, Paul and Jesus would have been setting slaves free.

So how do we think about that? And I guess I have a couple of answers. And the first is we need to have a healthy appreciation for biblical realism. There is a certain amount of realism and wisdom at work in Paul's instructions.

So slavery, like I said, was an entrenched economic, social reality. If all the slaves were all set free, then the result would not have been immediate happiness and joy and thriving and flourishing for anyone, the slaves included.

[23 : 28] The result would have been 40% unemployment, at least. In the Great Depression, our unemployment rose to 25%, and it was a miserable time.

Well, practically double it. It would have been anarchy and financial collapse. It wasn't good for anyone. Now, connected to that, in Paul's day, a quiet social revolution was already beginning to take place.

God had begun to move in the hearts of just normal people to begin to set their slaves free.

And as they did, it wasn't just a kick out the door. It was they would set them up. So if you're a doctor, he would set up a practice for you.

If you were an accountant, he would set up a shop for you. If you needed land, he would give you land. He set you up with a job. And so Felix, we've already met him.

[24 : 32] He was a trusted advisor of Caesar. He knew his way around government. And so where is a good place for him to work? Well, he was set free, and Caesar installed him as the governor in Palestine.

And so this revolution was already at work. The gospel permeated that culture. And as the gospel permeated the culture, that impetus, that system was going to start picking up steam.

And so that being the case, Paul sees this. Paul knows this is beginning to happen. Again, the best way to help the slaves was to give them the exact advice Paul gave them.

Be submissive. Be honest. Don't steal. And if the enslaved person did that, that greatly increased his chances of gaining his freedom.

Because what it did was it opened up the eyes of the master more and more to the fact that this person is a good person. A worthy person. A kind person.

[25 : 38] Paul, all throughout Titus, wants their lives to show the attractiveness of the gospel. That the gospel makes better people.

Better workers. Better citizens. The gospel is when, is Jesus, what we just talked about, calling people to himself. Now they belong to him. And now they're eager to do what is good.

And so Paul's commands to the slaves were their best chance, given the situation, at gaining freedom. Now maybe in our country, we have this idea of revolution.

That's how we gained our freedom. Well, and maybe we move towards that kind of thinking more. Those things have been tried in Rome.

And so maybe Paul's instructions didn't have the same sort of charisma as, say, Spartacus yelling and screaming for freedom as he led 70,000 slaves in a slave revolt.

[26 : 42] But Spartacus ended up dead. And so did all the slaves who followed him. They were crucified by the thousands. And no one's condition was better for it.

And so Paul's commands are full of wisdom intact. In the Bible, wisdom does not address the world and what we should do in rose-colored glasses.

It says, this is the situation. Now how do you best live in it? So there's this biblical realism. Now more than that, Paul knew that the gospel was going to destroy slavery.

Bit by bit, heart by heart, nation by nation. Christ came to destroy the works of the devil. All of them.

All of them. Like I said before, there was no slavery before the fall. And there wasn't going to be any slavery when it was all said and done. Christ destroys slavery.

[27 : 52] He destroys it at its root. Because now in Christ there is neither slave nor free. You aren't worse. You aren't a less human.

You're not less qualified or anything because you are a slave. And you're not a better human because you are a master. Paul makes that very clear. He tells the masters, you remember, you have a master.

So in Christ we're all equal sinners. Equally needing God's grace. Equally finding God's grace. At the cross. It's level ground.

It's level ground. And so slavery is no longer the defining issue, the defining identity for a man.

That's why he can say, if Christ called you to be a slave, or called you while you were a slave, don't let that worry you. Don't let it trouble you. Because in Christ you are the Lord's freedmen.

[28 : 52] And if you are free, you are Christ's slave. We are all slaves of Christ. And we are all free in Christ.

For the greatest among you will be the slave of all. And Jesus didn't come to be served, but to serve and give his life as a ransom for all, slave or free.

Jesus doesn't have a special affinity for the rich, the wealthy, the powerful. He says to the Corinthians, not many of you, not many of you were something in the world's eyes.

Jesus took the slave spot. Because it was slaves and the nobodies that Rome crucified.

So on the cross, in a very real sense, he was becoming the criminal. He was becoming, he was now a nobody. And so he became a slave.

[30 : 06] He came to serve. And who did he serve? He served everyone. He served everyone. He was the lowest of all of the slaves that have ever been.

Because he served everyone. And even though he was king of kings, he took the lowest spot. Now he did that in order to set men free from their sin.

He did that to set men free from every evil bondage. And either now or later. And so he says, when the son sets you free, you'll be free indeed.

So when Onesimus ran away from Philemon, he ran away nothing but a slave. But he ran straight into Paul.

And Onesimus' life changed. He was born again. And now Onesimus comes back to Philemon, not just as property, but as a brother. And Paul expected Philemon.

[31 : 04] And Paul expected Philemon to receive him as a brother. See, Paul, he was turning the screws, so to speak.

He was upping the temperature on Philemon. And gently and tactfully he was saying, you can't complain about losing a slave, Philemon. Because you've gained a brother.

And if there are any debts or whatever, count it toward me, I will pay it. But in reality, you owe me far more than Onesimus ever took from you. And I am sending something back far better than whatever you lost.

Philemon, he's your brother. Welcome him as you would welcome me. You see what Jesus does?

He makes masters and slaves brothers. Not just tools to be used.

[32 : 06] Brothers. Christ plants a virus in the heart of the system. And bit by bit, the virus spreads like a computer virus. And wherever the gospel goes, slavery begins to wither up and to die.

Because it cannot endure the truth that these are image bearers. These are dearly loved. They're brothers. Now, that percolation, that spreading of the gospel as it undoes slavery, that is not the end.

The picture in the Bible is not that the gospel will spread everywhere and then slavery will end everywhere and it will welcome this utopia of freedom and equality.

That is not the picture of the Bible. Because in the very end, in Revelation 18, you run into slavery and you run into its destruction. So, Revelation 18, Babylon the Great is living in luxury.

She is rich. She is enjoying her wealth. She is trading in all kinds of things. When she falls, it's the merchants of the sea that lament her loss because they've lost all their business.

[33 : 21] Because she traded in all kinds of things. Something very interesting, if you read Revelation 18, it gives you a list of 28 things that Babylon the Great is trading in.

And that's a significant number. It's seven times four. Seven, the number of completion. Four, the number of the world. And so, John is saying in an indirect way, in an apocalyptic way, yes, Babylon is bringing everything from everywhere into her.

And the last thing of the last of the 28 is the bodies and souls of men. So, right there with acacia wood and gold and silver and all of the rest.

The bodies and souls of men. One of those things is not like the others. So, Babylon, in her wickedness, turns the bodies and souls of men into commodities to be shipped across the ocean.

To be bought and sold for families to be separated. It's an indication of her blatant cruelty and her luxury-loving godlessness.

[34 : 35] She does not care who she destroys in order to bring herself what she wants. And in Revelation 18, what do you see? What does Jesus do?

He destroys her. The angel picks up a millstone and throws it in the ocean. And there's this huge crash. And he says, just like that, Babylon will be thrown down.

He destroys her. The greedy, oppressive, bloodthirsty, ruthless, heartless, luxury-loving, enslaving city. He hates it.

And he throws it to the ground in utter destruction. And when he does, there is a reaction. The angels in heaven, all of heaven, explodes in a song.

When they see Babylon fall. When they see the end of all of this whole evil, wicked system. They sing, hallelujah, salvation, and glory, and power belong to our God for true and just are his judgments.

[35 : 47] When the world sees Babylon, the evil, wicked system with all of its enslavement and all of its luxury-loving. When it is destroyed, heaven and all the saints say, God, you are just.

She deserved that. She's getting what she deserved. So slavery, like every one of the devil's works, direct or indirect, will come crashing to the ground.

Jesus drove a stake through it at the cross. By becoming the servant to all. By making brothers of masters and slaves.

He drove a stake through its heart. And the future is he's going to tear all oppression to the ground. And when he does, angels and saints will sing.

So, together, heaven and earth have this appointment to sing for the end of slavery. An appointment to sing the end of oppression.

[36 : 58] The end of ruthlessness. And we can thank God that none of us are slaves.

Not, I mean, not physical slaves. But, you know, I'm sure that you are going to run into some ruthlessness this week. And some oppression.

And some bosses that are heartless and careless and unkind. And I guess I want to encourage you, don't lose heart.

Jesus sees that. He doesn't like it. He doesn't approve it. And one day he is going to destroy every unjust system of power and oppression.

And we will sing, true, just are his judgments. We will be satisfied. And all those answers will be, all those questions will be answered.

[37 : 58] Let's pray. Lord, thank you for your word.

Thank you that in the gospel there's freedom. Thank you that in the gospel we find new levels of equality and kindness and gentleness.

Thank you, Lord Jesus, that this is what you do in the hearts of men. By our natures we are not this way.

On our own we are not this way. The fact that there's anything good. That there's any impulse for kindness or freedom. For seeking the good of others.

Is all because of you and what you have done. And so we give you thanks. And we thank you for what you are doing. What you are going to do. I pray that you would help us to think about all of these things clearly.

[39 : 05] In a gospel saturated way. These are the questions of our day. These are the questions that people are asking. These are the questions that we at least need to have an idea of.

And so please help us to be thoughtful, wise, and gracious Christians and ambassadors for Jesus Christ. Pray this in Jesus' name.

Amen.