

Joseph: God's Slave Psalm 105:1-22

Last week we left Joseph bruised, confused, and sitting at the bottom of a pit while his brothers pondered over lunch whether to sell him into slavery or murder him. As we have learned it was in fact their act of selling him to slave traders that actually set Joseph on the path of fulfilling God's plans for him becoming not only the savior of his entire family but also the entirety of Egypt and its surrounding nations. Which is why this morning's scripture reading rather than coming from Genesis was a Psalm that told of Joseph's trials in Egypt. The Psalmist knew that as horrible as his slavery had been it was still a necessary part of God's plan to keep His nation building covenant with Abraham.

Interestingly, outside of the Bible there is no other historic account of Joseph's exploits in Egypt, nor of Moses for that matter, which is not surprising since the records of the Pharaohs tended to enlarge only upon their victories while forgetting any defeats. So you see this idea of desiring to erase an embarrassing past is nothing new. Yet, one of the small details that does authenticate the historic existence of Joseph – as corroborated by other ancient texts – was that twenty pieces of silver was the going rate of that day for a healthy male slave.



But now put yourself in Joseph's sandals. One morning he was a privileged teenager, wearing fine clothes, running errands for his father. By the next morning he had been beaten, his clothes ripped off, his feet shackled together, and an iron collar fastened around his neck for the long 300 mile, 15 day, walk down to Egypt to be sold in the slave market.

Once he had everything, now he was a nothing: a 17 year-old slave knowing neither the language nor the customs of the culture into which he had been sold. But he wasn't defeated because apparently Joseph knew who was watching over him: the God of his Fathers Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. So while he spent the next 9-10 years as Potiphar's personal servant and the next 3-4 years after that as a falsely accused prisoner, Joseph knew who he was actually serving all along. If he was going to be a slave, Joseph would be **God's slave**.

Now don't think it strange that someone would choose to live as **God's slave**; this is actually a voluntary and very healthy spiritual lifestyle that can be lived by either a physically free or enslaved person. In fact our Bible urges ALL Christians to assume this attitude. **If you consider yourself a "Christian" then you should also consider yourself to be a slave for Christ.**

Which is why, even though a free person, Paul opened his letter to the Roman Christians by calling himself "*a slave of Jesus Christ ...*" (Romans 1:1). Then in the midst of

his explanation of how a person is “saved,” he wrote that we really only have two choices either to live as a slave of sin or live as a slave of God (c.f. Romans 6:16-22)...

now that you have been freed from sin
and enslaved to God,
the advantage you get is sanctification.
The end is eternal life.
Romans 6:22

Understand that Paul was not merely using slavery as an illustration but actually defining a mindset that should be the norm for all followers of Jesus Christ.

So today, particularly in view of the historic slave based racial tensions that are once again surfacing in our culture and the desire of many to remove anything that honored that ugly past, let’s take a hard look at what has been considered another bit of embarrassing history ... which is **the Bible’s attitude towards a life of slavery and its advice for those Christians who have been forced involuntarily to live as slaves.** From this study I hope that we might learn a new attitude of how living as a slave of Christ actually frees us to live more joyously in this world regardless of our other living conditions. Or as Jesus said,



if the Son sets you free,
you will be free indeed.
John 8:36

So let’s begin. The practice of slavery that resurfaced during the European colonial period and which was maintained through the first 100 years of U.S. history, was justified by the claim that with the enslaving of less civilized people we were also bettering their lives by “Christianizing” them.

Slaves, accept the authority of your masters
... For to this you have been called,
because Christ also suffered for you
1 Peter 2:18-22

Many passages from the New Testament, like this one, were then wrongly used by slave masters – and sadly even church pastors – to give Biblical legitimacy to the slave trade and also to help subjugate those slaves who had become Christians; declaring

that the Bible commanded them to be content with their enslaved life and the masters they were serving.

*Slaves, accept the authority of your masters
with all deference, not only those who are kind
and gentle but also those who are harsh...
For to this you have been called,
because Christ also suffered for you*

1 Peter 2:18-22

It was this abuse of Biblical passages that caused many black Churches even as late as 50 years ago to resent and reject most of the writings of the Apostles Paul and Peter. We will look at several more of these misused Biblical texts this Tuesday during our Something More Bible study. **But suffice it to say that nowhere in the Bible is the enslavement of one human to another ever justified, when in fact it even lists "slavers" as among the most sinful of people, themselves deserving of death** (Exodus 21:16, Deuteronomy 24:7, 1 Timothy 1:9).

Actually it was the Christianizing of the Roman Empire that eventually brought an end to slavery during that era. Then after the practice slavery resurfaced in the colonial period of the western world, it was again Christians who eventually brought an end to this next period as well. In England this was accomplished peaceably by such notable Christian pastors as **John Newton** – himself a former slaver -- and the politician **John Wilberforce**. Sadly in the United States the ending of slavery took the form a very un-civil war leaving deep wounds and scars which continue to haunt us to this day.

So, having been used both to justify and also to condemn slavery, what does the Bible actually say to those living a slave's life? To answer that question, we first need to understand some of the historical context of slavery,

Sadly the act of enslaving others, especially defeated enemies -- which was considered more humane than slaughtering them in mass -- has been a part of our darkened world from the most ancient of times. Apparently **it is a deeply ingrained trait within our fallen human nature to seek to force others to work for our most benefit at their least benefit;** which, even though our Bible is filled with commands to give workers a fair compensation, still forms the crux of current minimum wage debates (Leviticus 19:13, 1 Timothy 5:18).

So even though it never justified slavery, the Bible still had to acknowledge the persistence of slave keeping even among many people of faith. Being reminded that they were once themselves slaves – Israelites were only allowed to indenture their own people for up to seven years, but they could still enslave foreigners for life (Exodus 21:2, Leviticus 25:39-45).

Since the slave industry has always been very profitable that is why it continues today even here America and more so in the third world but thankfully not a widespread as it was in the past. It is estimated that in New Testament times, between 30-40 percent of the population of all major cities including Rome were slaves; most of whom never had any hope of ever gaining their own freedom and many of whom though Peter and Paul's efforts had become Christians. Which is also why the Apostle made a point of introducing himself to the Roman Church as a "**slave of Christ.**"

So what does our Bible have to say to that person who do to circumstances beyond their control must live the rest of their life enslaved to another human? The answer is that if you are a Christian slave, through your faith you can and should live a much freer life.

First you should note that the Bible never taught that a person should just be content with being enslaved. In fact, while Paul did teach that Christians should be content with whatever lot in life finds them, with regard to slaves in particular he wrote the exact opposite.

Were you a slave when you were called?
Don't let it trouble you — although
if you can gain your freedom, do so.
(1 Corinthians 7:21 NIV)

Second the Bible teaches that coming to faith in Christ erases all such human distinctions as male, female, black, white, rich, poor, slave, or free. In the Christian family everyone has equal worth, is equally loved by God, and must be treated with equal respect by their brothers and sisters in the faith; whatever their status or rank (1 Corinthians 12:12-27, Galatians 3:28, Colossians 3:11, James 2). This is why the Christian faith from the start was very popular among the working and slave classes ... because it gave these people a sense of self worth and status far better than they had in their secular lives.

Thirdly, the teaching that through Christ's forgiveness we are freed from the power of sin to now live for God and with a joyous future hope, gave those who were physically enslaved a higher purpose for their lives and the ability in spirit – if not in body – to rise above their current circumstances (Romans 6:15-23). As Paul would write to the Corinthian Church: *Christ died for all, so that those who live might live no longer for themselves, but for him who died and was raised for them.* (2 Co. 5:15)

Which brings us to the most difficult and often abused slave passages in our Bible.

The Bible does teach, that given a new sense of purpose and worth, and a mission to accomplish in the name of Christ even if living as a slave, a Christian can choose to live that life for the glory of God. **They can and should serve their masters as if they are serving Christ** because as Paul would often write ... God is not only with them to bring something good out of their enslaved circumstances and that God is also the one who will reward them for their service no matter what their earthly masters do. So Paul did instruct those Christians who were slaves to ...

*obey your earthly masters with respect and fear, and with sincerity of heart, just as you would obey Christ. Obey them not only to win their favor when their eye is on you, **but as slaves of Christ, doing the will of God from your heart.***

Serve wholeheartedly, as if you were serving the Lord, not people, because you know that the Lord will reward each one for whatever good they do, whether they are slave or free.

And masters, treat your slaves in the same way. Do not threaten them, since you know that he who is both their Master and yours is in heaven, and there is no favoritism with him. (Ephesians 6:5-9, cf: Colossians 3:22-24)

As noted by this verse, Paul was also quick to remind Christian Masters that they too served a higher master who would reward them according to the way they treated those under their authority (Colossians 4:1). In fact Paul's brief letter to Philemon was written to a Christian slave master asking him to receive back, not to punish but forgive, and perhaps even to free Onesimus his runaway slave who had somehow ended up ministering to Paul in prison. Onesimus probably carried this letter with him as he was being returned to face Philemon's judgment.

Which finally brings us back to Joseph as a slave in Egypt. We can tell both from the events of his story and his response to Potipher's wife about not wanting to sin against God, that Joseph recognized his life – even as a slave – was under the watchful care of God. Even while Potipher was his earthly master, Joseph had determined to be God's Slave and because of this Joseph did not just survive exile, slavery, anonymity, and false imprisonment in a foreign land - he thrived under it.

Genesis describes Joseph the slave as a "*successful man*" noting that everything he did "*prospered*" (39:2-3). The same is true of his time in prison, God was not only with Joseph, but also made whatever he did to prosper so much so that Joseph ended up becoming the in-house manager of the entire prison (39:21-23). And of course in time, living as God's slave, Joseph ended up feeding all of Egypt along with his family.

Now for the take home: What is your attitude about the life you are living?

- Did you think you were only living for yourself?
- Do you feel enslaved to some lifestyle that is beyond your control?

Christ's message is the same to you as it has been to every person slave or free that ever lived. To live as God's slave frees you up to live life to its fullest no matter whatever else is happening in your life. *For if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed.*

Let's pray about this.