



# **Bible & Life**

## **Bible Teaching Newsletter**

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## **Slavery: No Greater Evil**

by David Dunlap

Beyond a doubt there is no greater evil in the world than the enslaving of one human being by another. Today it is universally condemned by every nation of the world. Yet nearly every nation of the world was at one time enslaved by another. The Jews were enslaved in Egypt; the Dutch, Portuguese, French, British, Arabs, and many west African nations have enslaved others.

### **The Evil of Slavery**

Today, it is estimated that there are over 40 million people in the world that are still subject to slavery in the form of either forced labor, sexual exploitation, or human trafficking. The *Washington Post* reported:

*“Slavery is not a thing of the past. A report released Tuesday by the U.N. - affiliated International Labor Office (ILO) and the Walk Free Foundation estimates that there were 40.3 million people in some form of modern slavery around the world on any given day last year.”<sup>1</sup>*

Modern slavery reached its peaked in the 1800s, when African slaves were taken by force and sold in many parts of the world. In the mid-1800s the intrepid missionary to Africa, David Livingston, saw these evils firsthand. In his book *Missionary Travels*, Livingstone writes:

*“To overestimate its evils (of slavery) is a simple impossibility....We passed a slave woman shot or stabbed through the body and lying on the path. [Onlookers] said an Arab who passed early that morning had done it in anger at losing the price he had given for her, because she was unable to walk any longer. We passed a woman tied by the neck to a tree and dead....The strangest disease I have seen in this country seems really to be broken-heartedness, and it attacks free men who have been captured and made slaves.”<sup>2</sup>*

Christians, who have been redeemed from the slave market of sin, have been the first to speak out against slavery. Indeed, many Christians have been instrumental in seeking an end to slavery. In the 1800s, Christians such as politician William Wilberforce, a politician in England, author Harriet Beecher Stowe, an American author in New England, were at the forefront of the effort to end slavery.

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**David Livingston**  
(1813–1873)

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## Does the Bible Justify Slavery?

Yet there are many today who argue that Christians are the ones who have done the most to encourage and condone slavery. Some will even go so far as to label all Christians as racists and the Bible as a racist book. In these pages, we seek to show that the Bible never condones slavery but condemns it in the strongest of language. Many will reply, “But doesn’t the Bible regulate the treatment of slaves? Why did not the writers of Scripture speak out more forcefully against slavery?” To answer these very serious charges we need to look at the Bible a little more carefully. First of all, the Bible refers to two types of slavery: one which is completely condemned and the other, “voluntary servitude,” which was allowed for economic and humanitarian reasons.

The “voluntary servitude” type of slavery in the Bible was not based exclusively on race. People were not enslaved because of their nationality or the color of their skin. In Bible times, slavery was based more on economics and the care of a family. People contracted themselves as indentured servants when they could not pay their debts or provide for their families. If a man could not pay his debt, he could be imprisoned; however, servitude allowed him to pay off his debt and return to his family. In many cases, his family could join him. In New Testament times, doctors, lawyers, and even politicians were sometimes servants of someone else. Thus, many say the Bible condones all forms of slavery; but they fail to understand that slavery in biblical times was very different from the slavery that was practiced in the past few centuries in many parts of the world. The only type of slavery that was laid out in Scripture was that of voluntary servitude.

### Slavery Condemned by the Bible

Modern slavery, the kind that was practiced for the past 500 years, is completely condemned by the Bible. The slavery of the past few centuries was often based exclusively on skin color. In the United States, many Africans were considered slaves because of their ethnicity; many slave owners truly believed them to be inferior human beings. The Bible condemns race-based slavery in that it teaches that all men are created by God and made in His image (Genesis 1:27). Slavery, where one human being was kidnapped and sold as a slave to serve against his will is completely denounced in the Bible!

### “Man Stealing”

The Bible describes this modern form of slavery as “man stealing” (KJV) and condemns it completely. We find that both the Old and New Testaments condemn the practice of “man-stealing,” which was the basis of the African slave trade in the 19th century. Africans were rounded up by slave hunters and sold to slave traders, who then brought them to the New World to work on plantations and farms. This practice is abhorrent to God. In fact, in the Mosaic Law the penalty for such a crime was death. We read in the book of Exodus in the Old Testament:

*“Anyone who kidnaps someone is to be put to death, whether the victim has been sold or is still in the kidnapper’s possession” (Exodus 21:16 NIV).*

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**Moses  
Exodus 21:16 NIV**

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The New Testament states that slave traders are among those who are “ungodly and sinful” and are in the same category as those who kill their fathers or mothers, murderers, adulterers, perverts, and liars and perjurers.

The apostle Paul in his letter to Timothy speaks about the sin of trading slaves and condemns it in the strongest language,

*“We know that the law is good if one uses it properly. 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, for those who kill their fathers or mothers, for murderers, for the sexually immoral, for those practicing homosexuality, for slave traders and liars and perjurers—and for whatever else is contrary to the sound doctrine”* (1 Timothy 1:8-10, NIV).

Thus, the Bible is opposed to slavery and condemns it with the strongest language.

### **Christians Led the Movement to Abolish Slavery**

Although many secular writers and thinkers opposed slavery, it was committed Bible-believing Christians who were the most active in the abolitionist movement in the United States and Britain during the early 1800s. Because of his opposition to slavery, the printed sermons of English preacher C. H. Spurgeon were burned by a pro-slavery mob in the United States. He called slavery the “foulest blot” and stated, “It will have to be washed out with blood,” referring to the looming American Civil War. Many evangelical leaders opposed slavery, such as revivalist Charles G. Finney, D. L. Moody, and Harriet Beecher Stowe (daughter of abolitionist leader Lyman Beecher). Charles Finney preached that slavery was a moral sin, and supported its elimination. He said,

*“I had made up my mind on the question of slavery, and was exceedingly anxious to arouse public attention to the subject. In my prayers and preaching, I so often alluded to slavery and denounced it.”<sup>3</sup>*

Charles Finney also required repentance from slavery as a point of faith for those who wished to come to Christ for salvation. Those who refused to denounce slavery, he said, “would have the greatest guilt upon them.” This, of course, went beyond the teaching of the Bible as to salvation, but it showed his vigorous opposition to slavery.

In England, evangelical politician William Wilberforce (1780-1825) wrote in his diary, at the age of 28, “God almighty has set before me two great objects, the suppression of the slave trade and the reformation of morals.”<sup>4</sup> With others he labored, despite determined political opposition, to finally abolish the British slave trade in 1807.

Methodist founder and evangelist John Wesley denounced slavery as the “sum of all villainies,” and detailed its abuses in his sermons and writing. John Wesley used his influence to urge Wilberforce to continue the fight for elimination of slavery in England once and for all.

***“Unless God has raised you up for this very thing, you will be worn out by the opposition of men and devils. But if God be for you, who can be against you? Are all of them together stronger than God? O be not weary of well-doing! Go on, in the name of God and in the power of His might, till even American slavery (the vilest that ever saw the sun) shall vanish away before it.”***

**John Wesley**  
(1703–1791)



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## John Wesley and His Opposition to Slavery

The last letter John Wesley ever wrote was to the politician William Wilberforce, who spent his life fighting against slavery. Wesley wrote it seven days before his death, at the age of 88 years old. In this letter, he urged Wilberforce to continue his fight against slavery with all that was in him. John Wesley saw slavery as an evil that all believers in Christ must oppose.

*BALAM, February 24, 1791.*

*DEAR SIR — Unless the divine power has raised you up to be as Athanasius contra mundum, [‘Athanasius against the world.’] I see not how you can go through your glorious enterprise in opposing that execrable villainy, which is the scandal of religion, of England, and of human nature. Unless God has raised you up for this very thing, you will be worn out by the opposition of men and devils. But if God be for you, who can be against you? Are all of them together stronger than God? O be not weary of well-doing! Go on, in the name of God and in the power of His might, till even American slavery (the vilest that ever saw the sun) shall vanish away before it.*

*Reading this morning a tract wrote by a poor African, I was particularly struck by that circumstance, that a man who has a black skin, being wronged or outraged by a white man, can have no redress; it being a law in all our Colonies that the oath of a black against a white goes for nothing. What villainy is this!*

*That He who has guided you from youth up may continue to strengthen you in this and all things is the prayer of, dear sir,*

*Your affectionate servant,  
John Wesley*

### Endnotes

1. Adam Taylor, "There are an estimated 40 million slaves in the World. Where do they live and what do they do?", *Washington Post*, September 19, 2017 (Web)
2. David Livingstone, *Missionary Travels and Researches in South Africa*, (London: John Murray, 1857), ND
3. Charles Grandison Finney, *Memoirs* (New York: A.S. Barnes, 1876), p. 324
4. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Christian\\_Abolitionism](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Christian_Abolitionism)
5. A. B. Hyde, *The Story of Methodism* (Springfield, MA: Willey & Co., 1889), p. 237