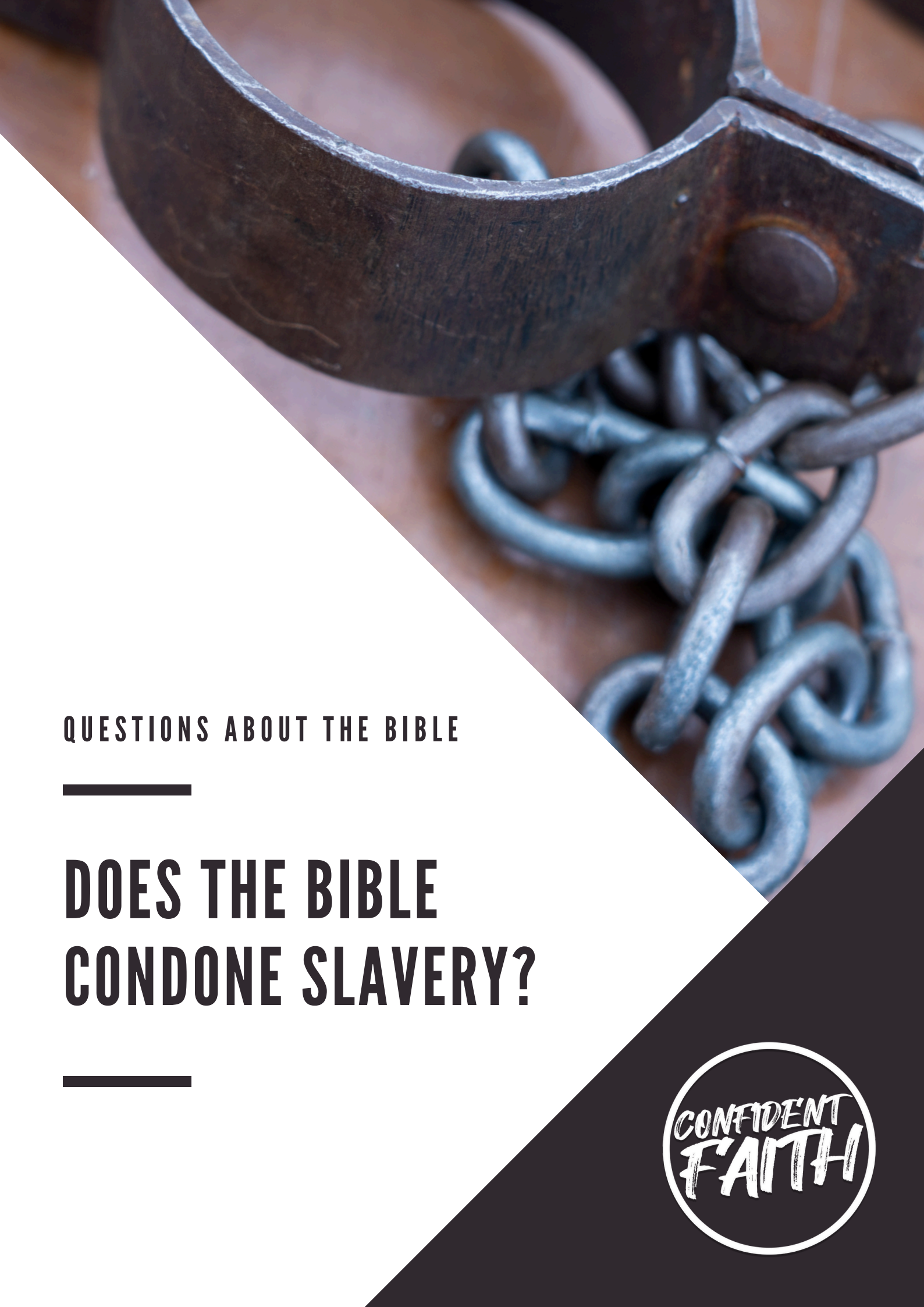




QUESTIONS ABOUT THE BIBLE

DOES THE BIBLE CONDONE SLAVERY?



QUESTION

**DOES THE BIBLE
CONDONE SLAVERY?**



The question of whether the Bible condones slavery is a complex and often misunderstood issue. Throughout history, the Bible has been used both to justify and to condemn the practice of slavery. To answer this question, we need to carefully examine the relevant biblical texts, consider the historical and cultural context, and understand the overarching moral and theological teachings of the Bible.

Slavery in the Old Testament

Slavery was a common practice in the ancient Near East, and the Old Testament reflects this reality. The Hebrew word often translated as "slave" or "servant" is "*ebed*". The term *ebed* could refer to a wide range of servitude, from bondservants to those working off debts. Slavery in ancient Israel was not identical to the brutal chattel slavery practiced in later centuries, particularly in the transatlantic slave trade.

The Mosaic Law provided regulations for the treatment of slaves, indicating that while slavery was permitted, it was not

without restrictions. For example, in Exodus 21:2-6, the Law states that a Hebrew slave was to serve for six years and be set free in the seventh year. If the slave entered with a wife, she was to go with him. If the master gave him a wife, and she bore him children, the wife and children remained with the master, but the slave could choose to stay voluntarily.

Exodus 21:2-3 (NIV): *"If you buy a Hebrew servant, he is to serve you for six years. But in the seventh year, he shall go free, without paying anything. If he comes alone, he is to go free alone; but if he has a wife when he comes, she is to go with him."*

Another important aspect of the Old Testament law was the treatment of slaves with dignity. Exodus 21:20-21 commands that a slave owner who kills his slave is to be punished, which indicates that the life of a slave was valued.

Exodus 21:20-21 (NIV): *"Anyone who beats their male or female slave with a rod must be punished if the slave dies as a direct result, but they are not to be punished if the slave recovers after a day or two, since the slave is their property."*

The laws also provided for the release of slaves during the Year of Jubilee, every fiftieth year (Leviticus 25:10). This was a time when all debts were forgiven, and all slaves were to be set free, illustrating the principle of liberation and the temporary nature of slavery within Israelite society.

Slavery in the New Testament

The New Testament does not explicitly condemn slavery, but it also does not endorse it as a divinely ordained institution.

Instead, the New Testament texts offer a radical reorientation of the master-slave relationship within the Christian community. The Apostle Paul, for instance, speaks to both slaves and masters, emphasising their equality before Christ.

In Ephesians 6:5-9, Paul instructs slaves to obey their earthly masters "as you would obey Christ," but he also commands masters to treat their slaves in the same way, "since you know that he who is both their Master and yours is in heaven, and there is no favouritism with him."

Ephesians 6:5-9 (NIV): *"Slaves, obey your earthly masters with respect and fear, and with sincerity of heart, just as you would obey Christ... 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 favouritism with him."*

Paul's letter to Philemon provides a powerful example of the Christian approach to slavery. In this letter, Paul appeals to Philemon on behalf of Onesimus, a runaway slave. Paul does not demand that Philemon free Onesimus, but he urges him to welcome Onesimus back "no longer as a slave, but better than a slave, as a dear brother" (Philemon 1:16).

Philemon 1:15-16 (NIV): *"Perhaps the reason he was separated from you 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. He is very dear to me but even dearer to you, both as a fellow man and as a brother in the Lord."*

This appeal indicates that within the Christian community, the relationship between master and slave was to be transformed by the love and equality found in Christ.

The Broader Biblical Message

While specific biblical passages regulate the practice of slavery, the broader biblical narrative points to a vision of human dignity, freedom, and equality. The Bible begins with the declaration that all humans are created in the image of God (Genesis 1:27), implying that every person has inherent worth and should be treated with respect.

Moreover, the liberation of the Israelites from slavery in Egypt is a central theme in the Old Testament, illustrating God's opposition to oppression and His desire for freedom for His people (Exodus 3:7-10). The prophets often denounced social injustice and the mistreatment of the vulnerable, including the poor and the oppressed (Isaiah 58:6-7, Amos 2:6-7).

In the New Testament, Jesus' mission is described as one of liberation. In Luke 4:18-19, Jesus declares that He has come "to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour."

Luke 4:18-19 (NIV): *"The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour."*

The Christian message of redemption through Christ emphasises that in Him, there is no distinction between slave and free (Galatians 3:28). The early Christian movement was revolutionary in its inclusivity, bringing together people of different social statuses and proclaiming their unity in Christ.

Conclusion

The Bible's approach to slavery is not straightforward. While it acknowledges the existence of slavery and provides regulations for its practice, the overall trajectory of the biblical message leans toward freedom, equality, and the inherent dignity of all people. The New Testament, in particular, reframes the relationship between master and slave, urging mutual respect and love within the Christian community.

Rather than condoning slavery, the Bible offers principles that, when fully embraced, undermine the institution of slavery and point toward a vision of human relationships based on equality and love. The question for us today is, how can we continue to apply these biblical principles in a world still plagued by various forms of oppression and inequality?

Notes

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Study questions

These questions can be used for personal reflection, group discussion, or theological study to deepen your understanding of this complex issue.

What is the meaning of the Hebrew word *ebed*, and how does its range of meanings help us understand slavery in the Old Testament context?

How did slavery in ancient Israel differ from the later transatlantic slave trade?

What specific laws in Exodus 21 regulated the treatment of Hebrew slaves, and what do these laws reveal about God's concern for justice and human dignity?

What was the purpose of the Year of Jubilee described in Leviticus 25:10, and how did it reflect the principle of liberation in Israelite society?

How does the New Testament, particularly in Ephesians 6:5–9, reframe the relationship between masters and slaves within the Christian community?

In Paul's letter to Philemon, how does his appeal regarding Onesimus illustrate the transforming power of Christian love and equality?

What biblical passages emphasise that all humans are created in the image of God, and why is this foundational to understanding the Bible's view of slavery?

How does the Exodus story demonstrate God's attitude toward oppression and slavery?

What does Luke 4:18–19 reveal about Jesus' mission, and how does it relate to the themes of freedom and justice found throughout Scripture?

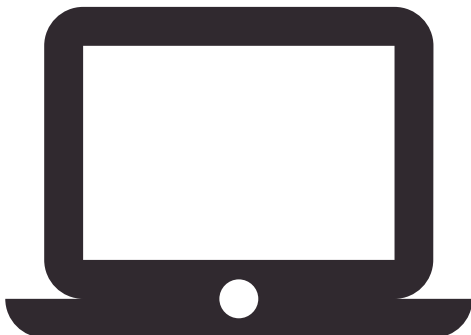
How does the overall message of the Bible move from regulating slavery to promoting principles that undermine it, and how might these principles apply to modern forms of oppression?



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