

We've been looking this month, the month of September, at headline issues – issues that have had a real impact in our world during the last few months, during lockdown. We've looked at various things. The first week in the month we looked at **Is this the end?** because there are one or two people who've been making statements about is this the end of the world, and all this sort of thing – we've looked at that issue and what the bible says about those things; so we looked at that. And then we had a look at various other things, we looked at the issue of **Racism** and black lives matter and what that has to say to us as Christians. And then last week we looked at **Democracy**, how democracy seems to be under threat at the moment, and the things we've taken as read in the western world, in particular, and how they've been coming under threat and how the bible tells us that whatever system of government we live under that actually we have a higher authority that we are responding to.

So this week we come to our last headline issue of these, and this is one that perhaps hasn't been a headline in quite the same way but it is an issue that I think is still very alive and very unfortunately very prevalent in our world, but it's a one that runs under the radar particularly because Covid-19 just seems to dominate the headlines; but this is a one that I do believe still has an impact on us in our society. And this last issue is **Slavery**. Slavery has a long, long history. We can look right back, as we're going to in a moment or two, into the Old Testament and recognise that slavery happened back then. In fact one of the key stories about the Israelites, the Hebrews, was the fact that they had been slaves and they were freed by God. But of course, being freed physically is one thing; but they had to learn to be free in their own minds, free in their sense of who they were. One of my favourite lines from a Bob Marley song is the one that talks about “free your mind from mental slavery, from none other than yourselves can set you free.” That sense of we need to be free in our own heads, in our perception of who we are otherwise whether we have manacles or not isn't going to make any difference.

So, just a little bit to look at the degree of slavery in our world at the moment. It is estimated (and it can only be estimations because so much of modern day slavery is hidden away) that over 40,000,000 slaves exist in the world today, and it's estimated that there are at least 100,000 slaves in Britain today. That's an indictment of a rich supposedly civilised nation like ours that we have 100,000 people who don't have freedom, who aren't able to express their desire to go out, to change their jobs, to be paid for the work that they do. And there are various issues that are a part of, or are closely related to, this issue of modern day slavery. One of the main forms of slavery today is **debt slavery**, or it's also called **Bonded labour**, and it's a situation where people are ticked into taking out a loan which they're unable to pay back and then under threat of their family being abducted, or under threat of their own lives, they are forced into slavery to pay off that debt. But of course for many of those people that debt is never ever paid off.

There are also other aspects of slavery that are incredibly difficult for us to accept and to recognise: **Child slavery** is a very real issue in our world today, and also it's closely linked to **Human trafficking**, and so one of the reasons why it's so hidden in Britain is that people are trafficked, they are brought into this country by various means and then they are hidden away in basements doing degrading work, but actually they can't be properly identified because they are never allowed out. So human trafficking is one of the main ways in western countries that slavery is such a big and difficult issue to deal with.

Down through time it's been argued that the bible actually condones slavery, and we can actually read these words in Exodus 21:20-21:

[Read: Exodus 21:20-21]

It goes on a few verses later in verses 26 and 27:

[Read Exodus 21:26-27]

Now that would seem to be, if the bible is giving those sorts of instructions to slave owners, a condoning of slavery? We can look through into the New Testament and find there a story of a man called Onesimus and another man called Philemon. Onesimus was a slave who ran away from his owner Philemon and went to Rome to escape, to hide in the big city; there he came across Paul and he was so impacted by the preaching of Paul that he became a Christian. And then Paul had as he was helping him to grow in his faith to tell him to do the most difficult thing: he told him to return to his master. So it would seem as though in both the Old Testament and the New Testament the bible is saying: "slavery is ok!"

Well, I would say it's a misunderstanding to believe that the bible commends slavery. Regulation of something does not mean approval of it. Take, for example, the child labour laws in Britain. The child labour laws in this country are that you can work as a child from the age of 14, and at 16, in terms of work, you are able to work as anyone else can. So for those years 14-16 you are still a child but you are allowed to work, but there are regulations on how you can work. So for instance, you can't work before 7am in the morning or after 7pm at night, you can't work during school hours, you can't work for more than 1 hour before school, you can't work for more than 4 hours without a break, and you can't work in ways that may harm your education, your health or your well being. Now, these regulations being there, does that mean that our government in this country wants children to be working, wants 14, 15 and 16 year olds to be working like that? I don't think it does mean that.

The government has recognised (and this is something that's happened over many years - there were regulations that came in in the 1870s and 1880s) that children were working and some of the work children did back then in the 19th century was horrendous - you'll have seen pictures, and perhaps seen stuff on the television, about children who would work in the mills, particularly in places like Lancashire and Yorkshire, and they would be the ones that would be getting in amongst the machinery of the looms and they would be the ones pulling the excess cotton out so that the machines didn't stop working, but of course one slight slip of the hand and a child could lose a finger, or an arm, or their life. Children also found themselves in the situation of working in mines. Horrendous stories of children who were picking up coal (the adults would be the one chipping away at the coal, bringing it out) and putting it into baskets for it to be carried out of the mine. And so for these reasons the British government decided to introduce regulations, and gradually over time those regulations have got more and more stringent - quite rightly!

Now this does not mean the government wants children to be working, but it's a recognition that it does happen and therefore it needs to be regulated. I would suggest to you that the very same reason is why we read in the Old Testament and the New Testament that these regulations about how slavery occurred in those days.

So, what does the bible really say about slavery? Well you may be interested to find out that actually in the Old Testament most slaves in Israel were volunteers! Now that seems like an oxymoron, doesn't it: I'm a volunteer slave. (An oxymoron is two words that don't seem as though

they should be together – volunteer slave seems like one of those.) How can you be a volunteer slave? Well, if you were very very poor and you had a debt to pay off you were allowed within the law of Israel to be able to offer your labour, yourself, for a certain number of years; you could receive the money up front for it. So sometimes a very poor person if they wanted to get their daughter married might choose to come into this form of slavery to be able to give a dowry for their child to be able to marry. So most slaves in Israel were volunteers – they chose it. But there were some important things to say about slavery in the Old Testament:

- It was for a maximum of 6 years – now I'm not putting that down, 6 years is a long time, but at least it was restricted: you were not allowed to enslave anyone for longer than 6 years.
- The slave, in this context, would eat with the family – they were not treated like cattle, or purely like possessions; they were treated as a member of the family and ate with the family, and usually were allowed to celebrate religious festivals with the family as well.
- No ill-treatment was allowed. In fact the Rabbis used to say, jokingly, that if you took on a slave as a Jewish person, actually you were enslaved by your slave because there were so many regulations in the Old Testament that the slave owner in these terms found themselves so regulated that it was hardly worth having a slave because of all these things that were introduced.

So once again this is about regulation because slavery was the norm in every society in the ancient world. Slavery was the norm, but slavery in other countries was horrendous, and the intention in these verses in the Old Testament was to make slavery more humane, to give it regulation and not allow it to take on its most awful and brutal forms.

So in the New testament we find that:

- To the Romans slaves really were property not people. The Romans treated their slaves appallingly.
- Owners could beat them, they could sexually abuse them, they could even kill them with impunity, in other words without any legal redress they could treat them appallingly. You could kill them and it didn't matter – they were your property. It's just like putting down your ox or your ass, or whatever other animal you might like to destroy.
- And if a slave didn't defend their master if their master was attacked, the convention was that you killed them.

It was incredibly difficult. Another interesting thing I discovered when I was looking at slavery in the Roman Empire was it was illegal for anyone to criticise slavery. Because actually somewhere between a quarter and a third of the population of the Roman Empire were slaves, and they reckon in cities like Rome up to half of the population was slaves. So the Roman Empire was held up and sustained by slavery.

So, if it was illegal to criticise slavery then Paul had to be incredibly careful in his letters, in the letters that he wrote to the churches around the Roman Empire. The church was a small embryonic group and Paul knew that if he wasn't careful he would be arrested himself, as he was in the end, and was imprisoned and was killed, but it would have happened far earlier if Paul hadn't been careful about what he said and how he said it. So Paul couldn't openly criticise slavery.

So in Ephesians 6:5, 9 Paul made these statements: "Slaves obey your masters as you would

Christ,” and he goes on to say “don’t just obey them when they’re looking and when they’re watching, obey them even when they’re not around, when they’re not watching you.” In other words, be the best slave you can be. That must have been a tough message to hear. But he also says, and this was being written to Christians (so you’d have slaves who were owned by non-Christians, but then also you had slaves owners who became Christians), “masters treat your slaves well and do not threaten them.” You see, Paul couldn’t say “all you slave owners stop owning slaves.” For a start those slaves would be destitute if they threw them out. And what would they supposed to do? They would be creating a situation where they were creating poverty on the streets of wherever they lived if they got rid of their slaves. So Paul here is walking this tightrope.

In 1 Timothy 6:2 Paul deals with those who have believing masters (where the masters had become Christians) and again he is saying “you should serve them well as fellow believers” because those slave owners are fellow believers who are devoted to the welfare of their slaves. So Paul is saying be the best person you can be in your context – both slave owners and slaves themselves.

And we have this story, just to go back to the story of Onesimus and Philemon. Paul must have had that difficult conversation with Onesimus saying Onesimus you have become a believer in the Lord Jesus. At some point his master Philemon had also become a believer, and so Paul says to Onesimus you’ve got to return to you master Philemon, but take with you this letter. And the letter that Onesimus takes back to Philemon is what we have recorded in the bible as this really short book (I think it is the shortest book...Jude may be slightly shorter) – it’s not got more than one chapter, it’s just 25 verses but it’s in the bible because Onesimus faithfully took it back to his owner Philemon – and in that letter Paul says about Onesimus “I am sending him, your slave Onesimus, back to you; I’m sending him back to you.” But then says to Philemon “Welcome Onesimus back no longer as a slave but as a dear brother in Christ.”

However, Paul did attack slave traders and slave trading. In 1 Timothy 1:10 he says “We know that the law is made not for the righteous but for law-breakers and rebels, the ungodly and sinful, the unholy and irreligious... slave traders, liars and perjurers.” So Paul there is making it really clear, he’s going as far as he can to say those people who trade in slaves – it’s wrong, it’s offensive to God. He’s probably right on the edge there on what he can get away with saying. In fact, of course, Roman emperors, particularly Diocletian, and Nero and others, did persecute the church and part of the reason they did so was because in those early decades, and first century of the Christian church the church was mainly slaves but it also had freed people and the rich, and they saw the Christian church as diluting and breaking down the fabric of the Roman Empire, and its structure and its class system. So he says about slave traders that it’s offensive and it’s wrong.

Paul also pointed to the overarching principle of the Christian faith. And I want to finish with this. Paul restated God’s valuing of all human beings, and these are well known words from Galatians 3:28 where he says “There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.” You see God doesn’t look at us on the basis of our status in life. And that must have been such a revolutionary thing, and a releasing thing, if you were a slave at any time in history. We know in the history of slavery in the United States they read the bible, they read about the freeing of the Hebrews, and so many slaves in the United States; they looked at the bible and realised it was a message of emancipation of them being freed by God. And Paul here is once again stating that all people are equal in the sight of God.

So we’ve looked at these various issues during this month – issues that I’ve called *Headline Issues*. And just for a moment now I’d like to spend some moments just praying about those who are experiencing slavery in our society and in our world. You know it comes closer to us than we may

realise. I know of at least one person in this church who themselves was trafficked to this country, who has had a tremendously difficult time, and even now is seeking leave to remain in this country because they were illegally trafficked here. And we still have legislation in this country that seeks to protect people when they have been trafficked. These issues are not far away – they are very very close; there will be people in this community around here, in Croydon and certainly in the rest of London, who are hidden away in basements, in rooms that they can't escape from; their passports will have been confiscated by their owners and they will find themselves in desperate circumstances – they may be told that if you don't obey me here in this country we know where your family lives back home (wherever that is) and we will make their life hell. So you obey me or you know the consequences. These things happen in our world today.

Let's pray together.

Dear Lord God we come to you this morning and first of all we want to recognise that we are so blessed by you that our circumstances are such that we, most of us here as far as I'm aware, are not living in circumstances where our freedoms, our fundamental freedoms as human beings, are restricted and curtailed to the degree that we can't live our lives in freedom. But Lord God we know that there are those in this borough, in this city of London, in this country of Britain, and in our world, there are millions of people who live with modern day slavery, whose lives are made into a grinding experience of hurt and labour, being forced to work doing things they don't want to do, not receiving pay for that work and are treated abominably Lord God. And we believe reading your word that this is offensive to you – far more offensive to you than it even is to us. Lord God we pray that our government and the governments of every other nation in this world will take seriously this issue of modern day slavery, that we will do all we can to bring legislation to outlaw slavery and to enable those to manage to get free from it, to be treated with dignity in the country that they have often been trafficked to, or have been enslaved in. Lord God we pray that on those occasions when we have an opportunity to challenge slavery, perhaps to sign a petition to say that we want our government to take specific action on this issue, that Lord God you will encourage us to speak out, to sign that petition, to go on a demonstration about this issue, or on the other ones that we've looked at over the last few weeks in this series. Lord God we pray that you will hear the cries of those who are enslaved as you did in the bible. We pray that you will hear those cries and that Lord you will answer. We believe Lord God that one day, your word says, that your kingdom will come on this earth as it is in heaven; Lord we pray for that day when your justice and righteousness will be known in this world. And we know and believe that in heaven there will be the total equality and *shalom* that signifies your kingdom. In your name we pray all these prayers, amen.