



[Body And The Resurrection](#)

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Why does the Bible seem to tolerate the institution of slavery?

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The slavery tolerated by the Scriptures must be understood in its historical context. Old Testament laws regulating slavery are troublesome by modern standards, but in their historical context they provided a degree of social recognition and legal protection to slaves that was advanced for its time ([Exodus 21:20-27](#) ; [Leviticus 25:44-46](#)).

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In ancient times, slavery existed in every part of the world. Slaves had no legal status or rights, and they were treated as the property of their owners. Even Plato and Aristotle looked upon slaves as inferior beings. As inhumane as such slavery was, we must keep in mind that on occasion it was an alternative to the massacre of enemy populations in wartime and the starvation of the poor during famine. It was to the people of this harsh age that the Bible was first written.

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In New Testament times, slave labor was foundational to the economy of the Roman empire. About a third of the population was comprised of slaves. If the writers of the New Testament had attacked the institution of slavery directly, the gospel would have been identified with a radical political cause at a time when the abolition of slavery was unthinkable. To directly appeal for the freeing of slaves would have been inflammatory and a direct threat to the social order.¹ Consequently, the New Testament acknowledged slavery's existence, instructing both Christian masters and slaves in the way they should behave ([Ephesians 6:5-9](#) ; [Colossians 3:2](#) ; [4:1](#) ; [1 Timothy 6:2](#) ; [Philemon 1:10-21](#)). At the same time, it openly declared the spiritual equality of all people ([Galatians 3:28](#) ; [1 Corinthians 7:20-24](#) ; [Colossians 3:11](#)).²

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The gospel first had the practical effect of doing away with slavery within the community of the early church.³ It also carried within it the seeds of the eventual complete abolition of slavery in the Western world.

[Slavery](#)

The fact that the Bible never expressly condemned the

institution of slavery has been wrongfully used as a rationale for its continuance. In the American South prior to the Civil War, many nominal Christians wrongly interpreted the Bible's approach to slavery and used their misunderstanding to justify economic interests. The terrible use of African slave labor continued in spite of those who argued from the Scriptures for the equality of all races.⁴

Only under the leadership of Abraham Lincoln did an American government bring an end to the nightmare of slavery that had long blighted the American conscience. The cost was incalculable. Nowhere in the world has more "brothers' blood" been shed over the issue of slavery than in America. (Over 600,000 soldiers were killed in the Civil War.) As President Lincoln said:

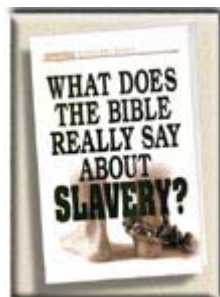
Fondly do we hope -- fervently do we pray -- that this mighty scourge of war may speedily pass away. Yet, if God wills that it continue, until all the wealth piled up by the bond-man's two hundred and fifty years of unrequited toil shall be sunk, and until every drop of blood drawn with the lash shall be paid by another drawn with the sword, as was said three thousand years ago, so still it must be said, "the judgments of the Lord are true and righteous altogether."

The writer of the "Battle Hymn Of The Republic," popularized during the Civil War, expressed the views of millions who participated in the suffering of that era when she wrote:

Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord,
He has trampled out the vintage where the grapes of wrath are stored,
He has loosed the fateful lightning of His terrible, swift sword,
His truth is marching on.

Today the Christian message of the spiritual equality of all men under God has spread throughout the world, and it is rapidly becoming the standard by which the human values of all nations are measured.

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1. By the time of Christ, there had been several large slave rebellions. The rebellion led by Spartacus in 73 BC terrorized all of southern Italy. His army defeated the Romans in two pitched battles before it was defeated and its survivors crucified.

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2. Also in direct contradiction to pagan values, both the Old and New Testaments clearly denied that there is anything demeaning about physical work. Jesus and His disciples were "blue collar" working men, and Paul was a tentmaker by trade ([Mark 6:3](#) ; [Acts 18:3](#) ; [20:33-34](#) ; [1 Corinthians 4:12](#) ; [2 Thessalonians 3:8,11](#)).

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3. Already by the second century, a former slave named Pius was the Bishop of Rome.

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4. William Wilberforce is a prime example of the influence of the gospel. An unlikely candidate for conversion, he was a high-living member of the upper classes and a rising star in English politics. His conversion to Christianity led to his lifelong dedication to the abolition of slavery in the British Empire. His dream was fulfilled just before his death in 1833 when the House of Commons passed a law that abolished slavery.

Another example is John Newton, the author of the beloved hymn "Amazing Grace." Newton was a slave trader prior to his conversion. Afterwards, he became a crusader for the abolition of slavery and an important influence in the life of William Wilberforce.

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