

## Module 412: William Wilberforce

*A Letter on the Abolition of the slave trade, Addressed to the Freeholders and Other Inhabitants of Yorkshire*, by William Wilberforce. London, 1807. Edited and introduced for the web by Dan Graves.

**“God Almighty has set before me two great objects, the suppression of the slave trade and the reformation of manners.”**

### Wilberforce Introduction

William Wilberforce was a parliamentarian and man-about-town when he became convinced of the truth of Christianity. Upon his conversion, he thought he should withdraw from parliament, but pastor John Newton, author of the beloved hymn “Amazing Grace” convinced him otherwise. God had placed him in parliament for some useful purpose, thought the wise old pastor, who had been a slaver in his wild youth.

So Wilberforce remained in parliament and, allied with evangelical leaders, exerted his influence to end slavery and ameliorate the social ills of England. Victory over the slave trade was many years in coming. In fact, he was dying when his allies brought him word of success.

Through writings, speeches, and example, Wilberforce sought to turn souls for Christ and to better social conditions. “God Almighty has set before me two great objects, the suppression of the slave trade and the reformation of manners,” he said. Our selection is from his “letter” on the abolition of the slave trade, which was actually a book of over 300 pages.

### Wilberforce Speaks out for Fear of God’s Punishment

...It would be criminal to withhold the declaration, that of all the motives by which I am prompted to address you, that which operates on me with the greatest force, is the

consideration of the present state and prospects of our country, and of the duty which at so critical a moment presses imperiously on every member of the community, to exert his utmost powers in the public cause.

That the Almighty Creator of the universe governs the world which he has made; that the sufferings of nations are to be regarded as the punishment of national crimes; and their decline and fall, as the execution of His sentence; are truths which I trust are still generally believed among us. Indeed to deny them, would be directly to contradict the express and repeated declarations of the Holy Scriptures. If these truths be admitted, and if it be also true, that fraud, oppression, and cruelty, are crimes of the blackest dye, and that guilt is aggravated in proportion as the criminal acts in defiance of clearer light, and of stronger motives to virtue (and these are positions to which we cannot refuse our assent, without rejecting the authority not only of revealed, but even of natural religion); have we not abundant cause for serious apprehension? The course of public events has, for many years, been such as human wisdom and human force have in vain endeavored to control or resist. The counsels of the wise have been infatuated; the valor of the brave has been turned to cowardice. Though the storm has been raging for many years, yet, instead of having ceased, it appears to be now increasing in fury; the clouds which have long been gathering around us, have at length almost overspread the whole face of the heavens with blackness. In this very moment of unexampled difficulty and danger, those great political characters, to the counsels of the one or the other of whom the nation has been used to look in all public exigencies, have both been taken from us. If such be our condition; and if the slave trade be a national crime, declared by every wise and respectable man of all parties, without exception, to be a compound of the grossest wickedness and cruelty, a crime to which we cling in defiance of the clearest light, not only in opposition to our own acknowledgments of its guilt but even of our own

declared resolutions to abandon it; is not this then a time in which all who are not perfectly sure that the Providence of God is but a fable, should be strenuous in their endeavors to lighten the vessel of the state, of such a load of guilt and infamy?

### **Slave Owners Neglect Religious Instruction**

Might we not then have expected that our own West Indian proprietors would be prompted, not only by considerations of self interest, but by motives of a still higher order, to pay some attention to the religious instruction of their negroes? Might not mere humanity have enforced the same important duty? Might we not have hoped, that the slaves of this Protestant and free nation, might have had some compensation made to them, for the evils of their temporal bondage, by a prospect being opened to them of a happier world hereafter, a world of light and liberty? But, alas! no such cheering prospects are pointed out to them.

### **Slave Owners Justify Slavery on Biblical Grounds**

It is however, most of all astonishing, that our opponents attempt to vindicate the slave trade on grounds of religion also. The only argument which they urge with, the slightest color of reason is that slavery was allowed under the Jewish dispensation. The Jews were exalted by the express designation of heaven to a state of eminence above the strangers who sojourned among them, and the heathen who dwelt around them, from either of whom, as a mark of their own dominion, God, who has a right to assign to all his creatures their several places in the scale of being, allowed them to take bondmen and bondwomen, treating them, however, with kindness, remembering their own feelings when they were slaves in Egypt, and admitting them to the chief national privileges, to the circumcision, to the passover, and other solemn feasts, and thus instructing

them in the true religion. Besides this, the slaves were to be set free at the year of Jubilee, or every fiftieth year, a command which was alone sufficient to prevent their accumulating in any great number.

But they who thus urge on us the Divine toleration of slavery under the Jewish Theocracy, should remember that the Jews themselves were expressly commanded not to retain any of their own nation, any of their brethren in slavery, except as a punishment, or by their own consent; and even these were to be set free on the return of the sabbatical, or the seventh year. Inasmuch therefore, as we are repeatedly and expressly told that Christ has done away all distinctions of nations, and made all mankind one great family, all our fellow creatures are now our brethren; and therefore the very principles and spirit of the Jewish law itself would forbid our keeping the Africans, any more than our own fellow subjects, in a state of slavery. But even supposing, contrary to the fact, that our opponents had succeeded in proving that the slave trade was not contrary to the Jewish law, this would only prove that they would be entitled to carry it on if they were Jews, and could, like the Jews, produce satisfactory proof that they were the chosen people of God. But really it would be consuming your time to no purpose, to enter into a formal proof, that fraud, rapine, and cruelty, are contrary to that religion, which commands us to love our neighbor as ourselves, and to do to others as we would have them do to us. I cannot persuade myself that our opponents are serious in using this argument, and therefore I will proceed no farther with this discussion. Besides, even granting that it were possible for any of them to be seriously convinced that Christianity does not prohibit the slave trade, I should still have no great encouragement to proceed, for, it may be prejudice, but I cannot persuade myself that they are so much under the practical influence of religion, that if we should convince their understandings, we should alter their conduct.

## The Immense Sum of Misery Caused by Slavery

If we would form a fair calculation of the aggregate sum of misery caused by the slave trade, we must remember that it is by no means to be estimated by the numbers which we actually carry away into slavery: Nor yet by adding to them all the wretched relatives, families, and connections who are left behind: Nor yet by superadding the devastation and misery which, to those who may not actually be caught and carried off, may arise from all the several predatory expeditions occasioned 'by' the slave trade, either directly or in retaliation of former aggressions originating from the same cause: Nor still by adding the destruction and desolation produced by national wars (for of these the slave trade is often the origin), with pestilence and famine, and all the various forms of misery which follow war in its train: Nor even yet by subjoining the wretchedness of those, with all their families and friends, who are the victims of injustice and treachery, masking themselves under the forms of law, or availing themselves of the native superstitions.

But let us endeavor to make the case our own, and to consider what it would be to live in a country subject to such continual depredations by night, and such treachery by day. These evils affect the whole condition of society; they poison the happiness of every family, nay, it may almost be said of every individual in the community. All the nameless but sweet enjoyments comprised within the idea of home, to all of which security is necessary, are at once destroyed; and Parke assures us that no people taste these pleasures with a higher relish than the Negroes.

Consider the intensity of the sufferings which the slave trade occasions in Africa, and the number of the sufferers; remember throughout what an immense extent these evils prevail, and the time they have continued.

To this vast mass of African misery, add up all the various evils of the middle passage. See there the husband and father, wife and mother, who have been torn from the dearest objects of their affections, and are now carried away, they know not whither, in their floating prison. Take in, their never having been before at sea, their confinement, their posture, with all the other distressing particulars of their situation; is not too much to say that you see them enduring exquisite bodily suffering. But, much more, consider the sorrows of the mind; see them dying of a broken heart, from, the loss of their friends and country, from their remembrance of the past, and their prospect for the future. In this state forced to bear the coarse brutality of the sailors, and urged by stripes, with a stomach loathing food, to eat; and with limbs galled with fetters, to dance; while their hearts are wrung with agony. Consider then that in every individual slave ship there are most likely multitudes of these wretched beings; many of them men, as Mr. Parke tells us, of some education; some of them men of considerable rank in their own country: but the whole cargo, as it is hatefully termed, consists of husbands and wives, of parents and children—all had a home—all had relatives.

But to the sufferings of the wretched slaves themselves, we must add those of the sailors also, who are too often treated with extreme barbarity. Of the latter, there are not a few who, though their lives are spared, lose their health, their sight, or the use of their limbs, not merely from the unwholesome nature of the climate of Africa, but from various peculiarities attendant on the slave trade.

Nor ought we to omit the moral injury which our country sustains from the number of persons who are rendered ferocious and unfeeling by the hardening nature of their constant occupation.

It would be difficult to add up the different items, much less to discover the precise sum of the misery which may fairly

be placed to the account of the slave trade in the West Indies. Here, however, let me first remark, and it ought to have been observed in the case of Africa likewise, the slave trade is justly chargeable with the prevention of all that domestic happiness and social comfort and prosperity which would follow from the introduction of the domestic system which it naturally supersedes. But when we proceed to the positive articles of this account; when we endeavour to sum up the total of the immense number of individual sufferers: Again, when to these we add the sufferings and the waste of our brave defenders, by sea and land, with the sorrows of their surviving relatives; and when we consider the unknown amount of evil, which, from the effect on the minds of our soldiers and sailors, may at some time or other result from, this class of ravages, evil possibly commensurate with the ruin of our country: When we remember that it is the slave trade which prolongs the internal weakness of our West Indian colonies, that it is this weakness which invites attack, and thence creates the necessity of defence at such a profuse expenditure of the lives of our countrymen; and that the facility of conquering these possessions operates powerfully as a temptation to our enemies to commence war, with all its unknown miseries and dangers : By what new denomination shall we in any degree fairly express the real sum of these several items?

There is still, however, another class of evils on which I have occasionally touched, which will appear of the highest amount to all considerate men, to whom the best interests of their country are dear, and who have been accustomed to trace the operation of those causes which have led to the decline and fall of nations. These are the moral evils both of the slave trade, and even, still more, because of greater extent, of the system of West Indian slavery. It is the fashion of the present day to pay little attention to evils of this class; but they are not on this account less real or less efficient. Their nature and force have been acknowledged by all writers of eminence, whether ancient or modern, who

have treated either of the prosperity or decay of the great nations of antiquity.

The system of slavery, especially of slavery in it's more hateful forms, never did nor ever will prevail long in any country, without producing a most pernicious effect: both on its morals, habits, and manners. This is an invidious topic, on which I will not enlarge; but let its amount be duly estimated by all who are interested for the independence, the prosperity, or the happiness of their country. When all these various masses of misery are piled up into one, who shall attempt to take the dimensions of it's enormous bulk. Yet we must acknowledge, that from it's very size it produces less impression on mankind in general. This principle may be termed a law of our nature and we suffer from the effect of it in every part of our great cause. I firmly believe that it is here the slave trade has found its chief security; Had it not been for the operation of this cause, both Houses of Parliament, I had almost said the whole nation, would have risen with one indignant effort, and have forced the slave traders to desist from their cruel occupation. Could we but place even the people of Liverpool themselves, where they could see with their own eyes the progress, from first to last, of this series of crimes and cruelties; could we but confine their attention so that they might have but one object before them at once, and might view it in all its parts distinctly, with all its circumstances and relations, I firmly believe they would themselves abjure that inhuman traffic for which they are now so ignominiously preeminent.

But the enormous dimensions of this mass of misery are such, that our organs are not fitted for the contemplation of it, our affections are not suited to deal with it; we are lost in the immensity of the prospect; we are distracted by its variety. We may see highly probable reasons why our all-wise Creator has so constituted us, that we are more deeply affected by one single tale of misery, with all the details of



which we are acquainted, than by the greatest accumulation of sufferings of which the particulars have not fallen under our notice. Could I but separate this immense aggregate into all its component parts, and present them one by one to your view, in all their particularity of wretchedness, you would then have a more just impression of the immensity of the misery which we wish to terminate...

### Discussion Starters

1. Why did Wilberforce feel Great Britain had reason to be seriously uneasy that God might bring judgment on the nation?
2. From what two considerations ought slave owners to have instructed their slaves in Christianity?
3. Slave owners twisted the Bible to justify their version of slavery. With what Bible principles did Wilberforce refute them?
4. What were some of the ways in which slavery was limited and made more humane in Bible times?
5. What were some of the direct and indirect miseries which accompanied slavery?