

St. Gregory of Nyssa on Slavery: 4th Century Rhetoric, Abolition, and Emancipation

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- [0 : 00] All right, well, thank you for coming out this morning to hear about St. Gregory of Nyssa. It's kind of an obscure topic, but I just, as we were starting out this morning, I'd thought, I was in the 7.30 a.m. service, and one of the readings, the Bible readings, was from 1 Peter.
- I thought I'd just read that, because it kind of touches on the subject matter that we're going to be talking about this morning with Gregory. In 1 Peter 2, verse 13 to 17, it says, Be subject for the Lord's sake to every human institution, whether it be to the emperor as supreme, or to governors as sent by him to punish those who do evil and to praise those who do good.
- For this is the will of God, that by doing good you should put to silence the ignorance of foolish people. Live as people who are free, not using your freedom as a cover-up for evil, but living as servants of God.
- Honor everyone. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honor the emperor. And the themes of the emperor, of freedom, of loving God, those are all really prominent things with Gregory of Nyssa.
- [1 : 50] But I thought I'd just throw out a question to you, kind of for my sake, also for yours. But when I mention the issue of slavery and the church's response to slavery, what comes to mind?
- Any, like, what's the first thing that pops into your head? Wilberforce. Wilberforce. Yeah. That's usually most of us, when we think about the church and any interaction with slavery, we instantly think to the late 18th century, William Wilberforce, abolition, those sorts of things.
- And so it comes to many people as a surprise that way back in the 4th century AD, that there was such a strong voice as Gregory of Nyssa speaking out against slavery.
- So we're going to basically just give a brief overview of who Gregory is, kind of the world that he lives in, the context of slavery in the Roman Empire, compare him a little bit to some contemporary church fathers and see what their response to slavery was.
- And then touch a bit on the theology of Gregory of Nyssa. He can be really tough to wrap your mind around.
- [3 : 25] So I kind of approach this with a little bit of fear and trepidation, because Gregory is just, the way he thinks, the world that he lives in, it's just vastly different than our own world today.
- So the reason that I chose this topic, it kind of grew out of a seminar that I took at Regent College last semester. But I think that just looking at Gregory's views on slavery and his interaction, one thing is it just challenges our ideas about how Christianity has interacted with the issue of slavery over the last 2,000 years.
- The second reason is that just by engaging with him, it can help equip us to dialogue with people who are hostile towards Christianity.

And often you'll have charges brought up against Christianity. It's like, well, look at the Roman Empire, look at the slavery there. Why didn't Christians speak out? Why did it take 18 centuries until William Wilberforce for slavery to be really dealt with in a thorough way?

And the third reason is just, it can challenge our own views concerning unjust practices that we encounter in our own society today.

[4 : 55] So basically, my argument that I'm going to set forth to you, because Gregory is a much debated figure, is that Gregory was a bishop.

And he was a bishop who was invested with much political power. And so these things combined with his distinctive theology enabled him to speak out as a harsh critic of slavery and to encourage Christians to free their slaves.

So with that in mind, I think a little bit of personal context is the best way to figure out who this guy, Gregory of Nyssa, was.

He was born in Cappadocia, which is basically modern-day Turkey, above Syria and the Mediterranean. He had a fairly large number of brothers and sisters, but one of his older brothers was Basil of Caesarea.

And I think you guys had Dan Porter come in a little while ago and he talked about Basil. And this is his younger brother, Gregory.

[6 : 22] He was part of a fairly wealthy family. He had a sister who named Macrina.

And so Basil and Macrina were both involved in the monasteries that sprung up as the church was wrestling with the Roman Empire embracing Christianity under Constantine.

So a fairly wealthy family. It was a Christian family, multiple generations of Christians. And he had been influenced by the church father, Origen.

And basically, Origen had a disciple named Gregory the Wonder Worker. And Gregory the Wonder Worker was a big influence on Gregory of Nyssa and really the whole area that he lived in there.

But Gregory had actually no formal education. His father was a rhetorician. And so were a couple of his brothers.

[7 : 34] And he was actually planning on kind of following along the path of being a rhetorician. But he was kind of along the path.

He had brothers who were clergy. Basil of Caesarea was a bishop. And then he got married. And they kind of just walked away from church.

Walked away from really practicing the Christian faith. But his brother Basil did not leave him alone.

And eventually he returned back. And Basil actually forced Gregory to become the Bishop of Nyssa in 372 A.D.

So Gregory was like a lot of early church leaders. He was kind of reluctant to become a church leader.

[8 : 35] But he actually became very, very important. Some of you may have heard of the Cappadocians or the Cappadocian Fathers. So that's Basil of Caesarea, Gregory of Nyssa, and Gregory Nanzianzus.

So for some reason there's just a whole lot of Gregories around. Gregory of Nanzianzus was a family friend. So you had two brothers and their good friend.

They're all really important theologians. But Gregory really didn't rise to any sort of prominence or anything until after Basil died. And basically what happened was at this time there was a lot of controversy theologically concerning the Trinity and Christology and the nature of who Christ was.

Was he equal to the Father? Was he somewhat subordinate to the Father? These were all the issues that were being debated.

And they were being debated from a very pastoral mindset. None of the theology was just this abstract sort of, well, let's just try getting everything straight in our heads.

[9 : 56] It was very real and very important. And so Gregory actually is known very much for his Trinitarian theology.

So like for instance, we recite the Nicene Creed in our Holy Communion services. Gregory and his theology was very influential on crafting the Nicene Creed.

He was one of the major figures at the Council of Constantinople, which was called together under Emperor Theodosius. And so his thought has kind of stayed with us in a lot of subtle ways that we may not be aware of.

He mostly developed his theology in a controversy against a man named Eunomius.

And Eunomius was a man who basically was arguing that Jesus was not equal to the Father. So he was God, but he wasn't equal.

[11 : 16] So there's some sort of downplaying of who Jesus was. And Gregory reacted very strongly against this. But what makes Gregory very difficult to engage with is he is one of the most platonic of the Church Fathers.

So he has a very strong Greek background. And that it just, sometimes you'll pick up some of his works and you read through it.

And it just seems very otherworldly, seems very detached. But the interesting thing is that Gregory very much, more than really, I think, most of the other Church Fathers, he affirmed the goodness of the human body and of the physical creation.

He wasn't an escapist, even though some people would argue that he was. He was very much about the incarnation and what that meant for life as a Christian.

Those sorts of matters were very important to him. But we don't have a systematic theology laid out by him. Everything is scattered throughout various sermons. There's a few works, like he has some biographies that he wrote, like the life of Moses, the life of St. Macrina.

[12 : 45] His sister, he revered her very highly and saw her as a model for Christian piety. And she actually played a huge impact on his life. He was, he drops out of the picture of Christian history right after the Council of Constantinople.

Nobody knows when he died. People think maybe about 395 A.D. But in the few short years from 372 to 395, that's when he mainly made his biggest impact.

So, so that's just a brief, brief look at Gregory of Nyssa and sort of his context.

The next thing about Gregory is that he, his world was the Roman Empire.

So, we're talking 4th century, and slavery was a big part of the Roman Empire. There's estimates that, by the 2nd century A.D., that for every two free adults in the Roman Empire, there was one slave.

[14 : 06] So, that's roughly 33% of the population. Estimates by the time of Gregory's, Gregory's ministry as bishop, some people estimate that it was 40% of the population of Rome would be slaves.

So, we're not talking about just a small minority that's hidden away or anything. It was very prominent, and anywhere you'd go, you would run into slaves.

But it should be nuanced that not all slavery was equal. Some slaves actually had fairly well off. If you were a slave of a very well-to-do family, you might have a great quality of life.

But that would just kind of depend on your context. Slavery is just a normal part of society, but it wasn't necessarily like modern slavery.

You had, I think modern slavery, we often think about African American slaves or certain ethnic groups that are enslaved.

[15 : 17] There might have been some of that in the Roman Empire, but slaves covered all kinds of people all over the place. So, it was kind of a much more diverse sort of slavery than we run into in modern times.

But, well, we'll get into a little bit about the details of slavery as we move on. But, in this time period of Gregory of Nyssa, he stands out among the church fathers, as I said, in his response to slavery.

One of his contemporaries is John Kersastam. Are any of you familiar with John Kersastam? Some of you have heard him. He lived at the same time as Gregory.

Lived a little bit. Their lives overlapped. He is actually, if you look at the Eastern Orthodox Church, whereas the West has Basil, Gregory, Nanzianzus, and Gregory of Nyssa.

The East has Basil, Gregory, Nanzianzus, and John Kersastam. So, very similar time period. Very similar overlaps and stuff.

[16 : 36] But John Kersastam's view on slavery was that he would urge people to free slaves. And he'd say that slaves are to be treated as brothers in Christ.

And he considered slavery as a rising from sin. But he kind of followed a lot of the church fathers in saying that, well, it's just a part of society and we deal with it.

Yeah, it's there because of sin, but we don't challenge the fact that there's slavery. We just simply treat our slaves different. We look at who they are and treat them as brothers and sisters in Christ.

And so you find stuff in John Kersastam where he urged Christians to have no more than two slaves per household. And then he's along the same lines as Augustine who comes in just slightly later.

Augustine just said slavery is a punishment for sin. So the attitude is kind of like, who are we to try to get rid of slavery? We're not thinking about that.

[17 : 58] If you're a slave, maybe you're just being punished. So there's a lot of different views even floating around among the church fathers regarding slavery.

Some would look at having some degree of freeing slaves as part of the Christian mandate. Some of them were just a lot more laid back and just accepted it.

And the common thing among them, with the exception of Gregory, was just that the institution of slavery, you don't condemn it.

It's just part of the world that we live in. So we go with it and we try to live as Christians. In some sense, we try to subvert the system.

We treat our slaves much better than most people in Rome would. And there's some sort of equality, but slavery is still there.

[19 : 01] Gregory's response is much different in that he is very vocal. He says that slavery is not something that's compatible with Christianity.

Just outright. Slavery is sinful. And so it's all the more striking that Gregory would speak out against slavery.

So we're going to... Well, with that in mind, with the context of who Gregory was, and just the prevalence of slavery in the Roman Empire, and the acceptance of it by much of the Church, we're just going to look at the Roman emperors and their influence on slavery.

Because it actually plays a big part in, I think, helping us understand why Gregory's response was a bit different than some of the other Church fathers.

So Roman emperors, if you look at them right from Augustus Caesar on through Constantine, they were...

[20 : 21] They would enact some reform from time to time. Generally, they're kind of unconcerned about slavery, but it pops up every now and then. So Augustus Caesar, he just brought in some normalized procedures for the freeing of slaves.

So slavery in the Roman Empire wasn't necessarily, once you're a slave, you're always a slave, there's no way out. There were ways to be granted your freedom or to attain your freedom.

But Augustus just kind of brought in procedures to say, well, if you want to free your slave, here's some ways that you go about doing it.

It's kind of debated as to how much people actually followed his procedures, but he kind of started taking steps in standardizing it.

Emperor Claudius, so this is 41 to 54 AD, he brought in some laws that pertain to freeing abandoned or sick slaves.

[21 : 27] So some sort of concern is shown for the well-being of slaves, but it's just sort of, well, if they're abandoned or they're sick, well, you can free them.

I don't really know all the motives behind that. But if you move up about 50 years to Emperor Hadrian, he comes in and he enacts legislation against extreme torture and castration.

Those two things are banned under Hadrian. And I think that gives us a little glimpse into the really dark side of being a slave in the Roman Empire.

So yeah, there were some slaves that did have things well off, but the odds are you didn't want to be a slave. As to whether Hadrian's measures were actually followed, it's kind of hard to say.

It would kind of depend on the area of Rome, the Roman Empire that you lived in, kind of depended on who was in power in your area. But Constantine, he was basically the Roman Emperor who had the conversion experience that is debated as to how genuine his conversion experience was.

[22 : 55] But he's the one who suddenly granted a lot of privileges to Christianity in Rome. And so Christianity went from really being done on the underside to popping up in very prominent ways in the Roman Empire.

And he was really influential in that he had the most extensive slavery reforms of any emperor in the Roman Empire, probably until Theodosius II at the beginning of the 5th century.

So for about 100 years, Constantine's pronouncements were just vastly different than everyone else's.

He had at least 25 pronouncements affecting slaves. So some of these were that slaves... Some of these pronouncements don't sound very nice, but it's actually better than it was before.

So like, pronounces were like, slaves are not to be branded on the face. It doesn't say about branding them any other way, but they're not to be branded on the face. Gladiators are banned.

[24 : 07] Slaves could be beneficiaries of wills. So you could actually will stuff to your slaves. And another one is, slaves are not to be intentionally beaten to death.

What we see from this is just, I think, a little bit further glimpse that you didn't want to be a slave. It was a brutal life. But there were little glimpses of there could be some good things in store for slaves.

You could treat your slaves well. But for the most part, generally most scholars that I've looked at agree that these pronouncements by Constantine didn't really have much effect.

Slavery kind of kept going on as it had been. Could be a very brutal and unjust existence to live. But one pronouncement that I want to highlight of Constantine, that's really important for Gregory, is that under Constantine, the church was made the official government agent for granting freedom to slaves.

Prior to that, you could go to government officials and try to negotiate your slavery or free your slaves. But under Constantine, he made the church the official agent for granting manumission or freedom.

[25 : 35] And so this is really, really important for Gregory specifically because he's a bishop. So anyone in his C, which is Nisa, anybody there who wanted to free a slave or to be freed as a slave, they'd have to go to the bishop.

And he'd hear their case. And he was the one invested with the political power to grant freedom to slaves. This freedom or this power was granted to all of the bishops across the Roman Empire.

So it's really more striking that it seems that Gregory was the one really vocal voice that spoke out against slavery and that there was other church leaders who basically accepted the practice.

Even John Chrysostom had a couple of slaves. And there's just this question that comes up is, what makes Gregory different?

Why would he speak out against slavery? And in another way, why wasn't this a big movement? Why didn't we see something like William Wilberforce and abolition?

[26 : 56] Let's just free all the slaves. Why was it such a kind of small, localized thing in that part of the Roman Empire? So Gregory, he took advantage of this power that was invested in him.

And he'd argue that slavery was not acceptable in the eyes of God. And with that in mind, we need to take a little bit of a look at Gregory's theology.

Try to get a grasp of what's Gregory's thought process? What's going on? Why would he do this? But before I jump into his theology, I just wanted to see if there's any questions or see if people are tracking with what I've been saying.

So any questions on just the historical context of Rome? I'm not an expert by any means, but yes? His native language?

He was Greek. Greek was his main language that he engaged in. Probably some Latin, but all of his works are in Greek.

[28 : 15] Yeah. So he read the New Testament and like, do you read English? Yeah, yeah. That's the point.

Yeah, yeah. Greek would have been, Greek is how he thought much more than anything else. So, yeah.

Well, it's, going back again to what Harvey said about the New Testament, we don't have a lot of examples of anybody dealing with slaves in the New Testament.

I mean, the Old Testament riddled with slaves, right? Right. Go back to Abraham. And the normalcy of slavery, which you have alluded to, is a point that isn't very often made.

Slavery wasn't abnormal. Everybody did it back to the Sumerians, as far as we know, and maybe beyond. It was cheap labor force. And so it was economically essential to many of the people that developed empires and so on.

[29 : 17] Because if you're concrete people, you've had to feed them. Well, then you have to have somebody working the soil and, you know, doing all of that stuff. Slaves. We had a free labor force, and that was also an idea that traveled to the New World.

But, so it was normal for Jesus to grow up in his society. It was normal for St. Paul. St. Paul says, when he sends Philemon back home to the Master, treat him like a brother, treat him differently.

But he doesn't say free him, which is kind of unusual. So I guess I'm wondering, where did Gregory's ideas come from? They didn't come from the Bible, I guess is what I'm wondering.

Did they? Not directly. Yeah, I think it depends on how you read the Bible. And what I mean by that is Gregory had a very distinctive way of reading Scripture that's really foreign to the way that we look at it.

But I think also that some of the passages on slavery can lean towards being very subversive to the way that Christians were to engage with slavery.

[30 : 41] So, for example, one of the things, like we're going through the Book of Romans at St. John's and getting into chapter 13, Paul starts talking about rulers and subjects.

So it's not necessarily slavery, but he starts addressing the rulers about how you treat your slaves or how you treat those who are in submission to you and to treat them fair and just.

And he even goes so far as to say to honor the emperor. and that it's just he's just kind of flipping things upside down in a way that that's kind of subversive.

It's kind of underground. But you're right that he never explicitly calls for the abolition of slavery. But within that system, he basically tries to be saying that the emperor, you are on equal footing with the lowest slave.

You are all brothers. You are all children of God. And that has ramifications for how you live for each other. And then, so work that out.

[32 : 02] How do you show love to each other? But if you have something like slavery where the whole empire is dependent on it, it's, I think, something that changes very, very slowly.

Kind of more little seeds here and there and then it grows up. And then you have something radical. Yeah? What's the legal difference between servants and slaves?

I'm not certain about that. Ownership? That was it. Yeah, ownership. Yeah, yeah. You could have you could be a slave, you could be freed, and then you could be a bond servant where you voluntarily stay as a servant to somebody.

So, you're free, but you stay on. So, so, so, so, yeah, slavery, it's, it's a really, really tough issue, but I think to see how Gregory interacts with it, what's helpful is to just take a look at three main theological emphases that are part of just Gregory's thought.

So, like I said, he never laid out a systematic theology volume, and here's what I believe. Everything's like, I'm addressing this theological controversy with Eunomius, and as I'm doing this, I am bringing in all of these thoughts.

[33 : 43] And so, when we're reading Gregory, it's kind of trying to figure out, okay, what did he think about the Trinity? What did he think about the nature of God?

What did he think about these things? It's kind of piecing it back together to try to form a, a, a view of who Gregory, how Gregory thought.

So, so, it's kind of tricky, it's kind of confusing, but I'm hoping that I can help us by taking a look at three emphases that he places that's kind of found throughout all of his letters, and we'll take a look at a few little things that he says specifically about slavery, and hopefully that'll help make sense of how Gregory is able to have this radically different or innovative new view of slavery that you don't find anywhere else.

Most of his stuff is in the, he has a homily on the, on Ecclesiastes, he has a number of them, this is his fourth homily on Ecclesiastes, and the interesting thing about that is right in the middle of a sermon on Ecclesiastes, he actually branches out into this big tangent on Genesis 1, 26 to 27, and he tends to do that a lot, he'll have this one text and he's going along, and then he'll just jump out and just start going on, on another text or another issue, and that's where slavery pops up.

The most, for the most part when he spoke against slavery, we find it in his Easter sermons. He, that, that's where he was most adamant about if you're a Christian, you free your slaves.

[35 : 38] So, so in his homily on Ecclesiastes, his fourth one, we find him saying, well, I guess, he views Ecclesiastes as a confession by the author.

So, the preacher of Ecclesiastes, the way he reads it is that the teacher is confessing his sin, essentially.

And so then when he's engaging with his preaching, he's, that's kind of the tone that he's taking. And at one point in his sermon on Ecclesiastes, he says, you condemn man to slavery when his nature is free and possesses free will, and you legislate in competition with God, overturning his law for the human species.

So, very strong. language about slavery, and he's relating it to the fact that man's nature is free. So, so this idea of nature pops up all over the place in Gregory.

So that, that's the, the first theological anthesis is on nature. And, he speaks of it in, in a few different ways.

[37 : 03] And this is where he will reference Genesis 1, 26 to 27. He jumps over there and, let me just open up to Genesis 1, 26 to 27.

and, basically, it says, then God said, let us make man in our image after our likeness and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.

So, God created man in his own image. In the image of God, he created him, male and female, he created them. So, he somehow, he's talking about Ecclesiastes, then he starts talking about slavery, and then he'll end up in Genesis with this passage on let us make man in our image.

And so, there's a lot of parallels with this passage, and he's got one other work called on the making of man, which is kind of, he develops his whole anthropology, and it's mostly focused around this passage from Genesis.

So, there's a lot of interplay in all of this stuff that we have. So, but there's two words that he will go to when he's talking about nature, as in the nature of man or the nature of God.

[38 : 35] The first word is physis, and he'll often speak of the human nature or the human physis, intending a common or universal reality, which equally pertains to all human beings, and that's what makes them human.

Basically, for Gregory, there's this common human nature that God created. That's what he would say that Genesis 1.26 is talking about, that when God said, let us make man in our image and our likeness, this nature, he's talking about humanity as a whole, he's not talking about individuals.

And this is what links all of humanity together. So, it's very much not an individual sort of view. and then he'll elaborate on this nature, this physis, and he'll often use the word pleroma, and he'll use that to describe what human nature is all about.

So, basically, what he'll mean by this human nature, his human pleroma, is that what humanity is, it's characterized by not only every human being participating in this thing we call humanity, but also the fullness or the perfection of humanity.

So, there's kind of this double-sided thing that he all ties together in this idea of the nature of humanity. And it's this fullness, this perfection of all human beings all together in this collective nature, that's what unites all human beings.

[40 : 45] And this is really important for Gregory, because that that's kind of his starting point. His starting point's not from individual people, it's from humanity as this collective whole.

And then he'll go into Genesis 1.26, and he'll key in on the idea of humanity created in the image of God.

And you'll notice in Genesis 1.26 that it says, let us make man in our image after our likeness.

So he looks at that, he sees that's plural. And so Gregory, as one of the defenders of the Trinity against other theologians who are challenging the ideas of the Trinity, he'll look at this passage and say, well, that's referring to the Trinity, us.

Let us make man, man plural, humanity, this thing that encompasses all people throughout all time.

[41 : 56] Let us make humanity in our image, and that image is in the image of the triune God. So already it's kind of he's looking at it much more from a social kind of aspect, a corporate sort of feeling.

And he'll say that redemption, when Christ comes to the earth in the incarnation, what he does is he assumes this pleroma, this nature of humanity.

he takes on human nature upon himself, and he restores it to its original purpose. And that original purpose is to grow in likeness of God, to reflect the glory of God, to this never-ending upward ascent into this heavenly existence God's glory.

And so Gregory emphasizes Christ as the whole lump of humanity, all of humankind.

and the implication for Gregory is that he was