

## **Is God's Law Bondage?**

**Some theologians associate God's law with slavery. But the Bible presents it as the missing key to true freedom.**

by Noel Hornor

In the annals of human experience, some of the darkest episodes of man's inhumanity to man have involved the treatment of slaves. Even today humans are sometimes subjected to brutality as the property of other human beings.

*World Press Review* paints a picture of contemporary slavery in one nation: "Men, women and children in shackles and chains hack at sugar canes as the midday sun beats down. Armed guards swing rifle butts into the ribs of workers caught slacking. The prisoners are given only water and grain for food. When darkness falls, the men are dragged to a clearing and chained to trees for the night. Women usually sleep alone or with children in makeshift sheds. At dawn, the men, women and children are kicked awake" (June 1996, p. 44). Then the misery of the former day is repeated.

According to another magazine, "The Geneva-based International Labor Organization reports that tens of millions of people around the globe, including children as young as six, are working in bondage-in dangerous and degrading conditions that often involve 18-hour workdays, beatings and sexual abuse" (*Time*, March 11, 1993, p. 26).

### **A saga of slavery**

Some 2,500 years ago an entire nation was in bondage. When we first encounter Israel as a nation in the Bible, the Israelites had gone from being guests in Egypt, enjoying the bounties of the land side by side with their Egyptian hosts, to being slaves. The Bible says the Egyptians set "taskmasters" over the Israelites "to afflict them with their burdens," forcing them to construct cities such as Pithom and Raamses (Exodus 1:11). The Israelites were cruelly forced to labor at projects designed to honor the proud Egyptian kings. So brutal were these Egyptian masters that they even murdered Israel's newborn male babies (verse 22).

Such suffering of slaves in Egypt is verified by archaeological evidence from the land of the Pharaohs. "... The famous wall painting from the Thebean tomb of Rekhmire ... [depicts] the overseer of the brick-

making slaves during the reign of Thutmose III" (*Expositor's Bible Commentary*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, 1990, Vol. 2, p. 304).

The painting on Rekhmire's tomb shows "overseers armed with heavy whips" (ibid.). Hard labor and beatings were a harsh reality of Israelite life. "Now it came to pass in those days, when Moses was grown, that he went out to his brethren and looked at their burdens. And he saw an Egyptian beating a Hebrew, one of his brethren" (Exodus 2:11).

The Israelites cried out in their suffering. God said, "I have surely seen the oppression of My people ... and have heard their cry ..." (Exodus 3:7).

### **Deliverance from slavery**

God had pity on His people, and when the time was right He intervened to deliver them from bondage. He appointed Moses as a leader to bring them out of Egypt (verse 10). In a series of dramatic events, God took them out of Egypt and established them as an independent and free nation. Their departure from Egyptian soil climaxed in the miraculous parting of the Red Sea, providing an escape from Pharaoh's pursuing army (Exodus 14:21-31). When the Egyptians attempted to follow, the walls of water collapsed over them (verse 28).

God had chosen Israel to be His own people. Having removed Israel's Egyptian yoke, God's next step was to instruct the people about His law. With Moses leading them, God brought the Israelites to the foot of Mount Sinai (Exodus 19:2). Then, beginning with the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20), God gave His law to Israel.

These were the standards by which Israel was to live. They were intended to guide a people no longer in the bonds of slavery. God made it plain to the Israelites that they were to be set apart by obedience to His commandments. He told them not to follow the practices of the land of Egypt, out of which they had come, nor to walk in the practices of the land of Canaan, to which they were going. They were to follow *His* standard (Leviticus 18:1-4).

At this point some people make a quantum theological leap of logic: They believe that God removed the Israelites from captivity to the Egyptians and brought them into another state of slavery-subjugation to a harsh law.

Several other assumptions follow from this view; for example, that this law was only for Israel, and when one accepts Christ he is not subject to the Old Testament law because Christ abolished the law.

But what was Christ's position on the law? Did He take a clear stand on it? In the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7), He unambiguously shared His view of the Old Testament: "Do *not* think that I came to destroy the Law or the Prophets. I did *not* come to destroy but to fulfill. For assuredly, I say to you, till heaven and earth pass away, one jot or one tittle will by no means pass from the law till all is fulfilled" (Matthew 5:17-18, emphasis added throughout).

First we must recognize what Jesus meant when He used the terms *Law* and *Prophets*. "... Jesus is taking pains to relate his teaching and place in the history of redemption to the OT [Old Testament] Scriptures. For that is what 'Law or the Prophets' here means: the Scriptures" (*Expositor's*, Vol. 8, p. 142).

### **Christ's statements about the law**

Christ stated that He did not come to *destroy* the law, but to *fulfill* it. "His purpose is not to change the law, still less to annul it, but to reveal the full depth of meaning that it was intended to hold" (John R.W. Stott, *The Bible Speaks Today*, Inter-Varsity Press, Leicester, England, 1978, p. 72).

Elsewhere Jesus emphasized that we must obey the law of God. On one occasion "one came and said to Him, 'Good Teacher, what good thing shall I do that I may have eternal life?'" Christ's response was clear: "... If you want to enter into life, *keep the commandments*" (Matthew 19:16-17). The next two verses make it plain that the commandments Jesus refers to here are the Ten Commandments.

In spite of Christ's plain statement about the Old Testament law, many students of the Bible down through the years have misunderstood His teaching.

"In every generation of the Christian era there have been those who could not accommodate themselves to Christ's attitude to the law ... for they declare that the very category of law is abolished for the Christian ... that no law any longer binds Christian people except the law of love ..." (*The Bible Speaks Today*, p. 72).

Those who believe that the law is no longer binding tend to take the approach that to assert that commandments are to be obeyed is to enact a form of bondage, whereas to be a Christian means to be free.

### **Is the law contrary to freedom?**

Subjection to laws is not of itself a form of bondage. Every nation on earth has laws and statutes. America is a nation whose population has, to a considerable extent, accommodated others who came seeking greater freedom-liberties that are safeguarded by *law*.

"Three quarters of the population ... are the descendants of immigrants from Asia and Africa and, most of all, from the continent of Europe." Many of them, particularly Jewish immigrants, "saw America as the Land of Canaan" (Alistair Cooke, *America*, Alfred A. Knopf, New York, 1980, pp. 273, 278).

When these immigrants arrived and became citizens, they took an oath by which they agreed to obey the laws of their newly embraced land. This oath includes these words: "I will give my support to the Constitution and to the laws of the United States. I will obey them."

Many newly naturalized citizens came to America to escape despotism and totalitarianism in their native lands. They did not consider obedience to America's laws to be another form of bondage. They embraced what they considered to be a new life *full of freedom*.

### **God's law is not bondage**

True liberty is not freedom *from* law. True freedom can be found only *within* law. Righteous laws secure and guarantee freedom. "But he who looks into the perfect law of *liberty* and continues in it, and is not a forgetful hearer but a doer of the work," wrote the apostle James, "this one will be blessed in what he does" (James 1:25).

James called God's commandments the "law of liberty," not a form of slavery. He said one who obeys it is blessed; his life is one of happiness and peace.

The law of God is not a straitjacket; it doesn't restrain freedom. It is a way of life that guarantees the welfare of the individual and of society. "Peace is the reward of those who love thy law; no pitfalls beset their path" (Psalm 119:165, New English Bible).

When God brought the Israelites out of Egypt, He did not deliver them from one form of slavery into another. He liberated them from a society in which they had no protection through law. The Egyptian code of law did not provide freedom for the Israelites. It did not protect them from evil treatment nor guarantee their security. Israel was abused and oppressed.

God delivered His people from these cruelties and gave them a law that would guarantee their safety and protection. "Now, O Israel, listen to the statutes and the judgments which I teach you to observe, *that you may live ...*" (Deuteronomy 4:1). It was a *perfect* law (Psalm 19:7). Israel "needed no additional rules or directives, and none of those given were superfluous ..." (*Expositor's*, Vol. 3, p. 42).

### **God's law and the Christian**

God calls Christians to accept Jesus Christ as personal Savior. We are also called to a life of obedience to God's commandments. Law-keeping does not earn a person salvation, which is a gift from God (Romans 6:23); the keeping of His laws is our grateful response to God (1 John 5:2-3; John 14:15, 21).

When called to repentance, people invariably find themselves living in some degree of disobedience to the commandments of God. God calls us to repent of this former way of living. "You had time enough in the past to do all the things that men want to do in the pagan world. Then you lived in license and debauchery, drunkenness, revelry and tippling, and the forbidden worship of idols" (1 Peter 4:3, NEB).

The law stands as our guide to repentance. It identifies our sin and shows us how we should live. As Paul put it, "Indeed I would not have known what sin was except through the law" (Romans 7:7, New International Version).

Our new life is a life of *freedom*. Far from being a blueprint for slavery, the commandments of God illuminate the pathway of a free life—a life free from the debilitating and destructive consequences of sin.

Real freedom is found only in obedience to God. Lawlessness, or disobedience to God, is sin (1 John 3:4), and it is a form of bondage. Jesus said that "whoever commits sin is a *slave of sin ...* Therefore if the Son makes you free, you shall be free indeed" (John 8:34, 36).

This true freedom is found through Jesus Christ. We receive forgiveness of sins through His sacrifice. Both the law and Christ's personal instruction and example tell us, for instance, that a Christian should observe the Passover as a reminder of the wonderful freedom gained through His sacrifice (1 Corinthians 11:23-28).

We are also told to keep the Days of Unleavened Bread as a reminder that we are to live a sinless (unleavened) life, forsaking the transgressions of former days (1 Corinthians 5:7-8).

This is not bondage. It is true freedom. It is the path to happiness and joy and the way to eternal life. *GN*