

# Proclaim Liberty

Rod Reynolds

The common condition of mankind down through history has been one of bondage. For example, in the mid-nineteenth century of some 60 million Russians about 50 million were serfs – a form of bondage little better than abject slavery. The word serf comes from a Latin word meaning slave. Add several million who were conscripted into the army and others in prison or other forms of bondage, fewer than ten percent of the Russian population had anything like what we would consider personal freedom. In the whole of Europe during the Middle-Ages less than 10 percent of the population were freemen. “Serfdom is an institution that has always been commonplace for human society” (Wikipedia.org, “Serfdom”).

In the last two centuries B.C., the Romans used slaves, "...more widely than ever before and probably with greater brutality. In the mines they are whipped into continuing effort by overseers; in the fields they work in chain gangs; in the public arenas they are forced to engage in terrifying combat as gladiators" (historyworld.net, “HISTORY OF SLAVERY,”).

In the Roman Empire well-educated slaves might work at jobs such as teaching and secretarial work. Their lot was infinitely better by comparison to the run-of-the-mill slaves, many of whom spent all their waking hours working in construction, agriculture, and mining. Others worked under the lash in galleys, and or were forced to fight in gladiatorial contests for amusement. City slaves and household slaves fared better, but any slave could be used for sexual exploitation by members of the master's household. A Roman slave could be whipped or even killed at the pleasure of his master. "This right was often exercised with great cruelty" (tribunesandtriumphs.org, “Roman Slaves”). Marriage among slaves was not recognized, and children of a female slave belonged to the slave's master.

Slavery was often practiced among the indigenous peoples of the Western Hemisphere prior to modern European colonization. Often the treatment given to slaves was unimaginably brutal. Slaves were not only forced into labor, but not infrequently, especially among the Maya and Aztecs, offered in human sacrifice. 84,000 victims were said

to have been sacrificed in just one temple inauguration of the Aztecs in 1487 ("History of slavery," en.wikipedia.org).

While many among their own populations may have been enslaved to one degree or another, many societies that have practiced slavery tended to enslave people of other tribes, nationalities or religions. Often populations subjugated in war have been enslaved. Tens of thousands of Jews were enslaved, for example, by the Romans as a consequence of the war which concluded with the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 A.D. (Josephus, *Wars*, 3.10.10; 6.9.2; 6.9.3).

The brutal treatment afforded slaves may have a racial component, but not necessarily. Professor Robert Davis, author of *Christian Slaves, Muslim Masters: White Slavery in the Mediterranean, the Barbary Coast, and Italy, 1500-1800*, writes, "We cannot think of slavery as something that only white people did to black people" ("WHEN EUROPEANS WERE SLAVES," researchnews.osu.edu). His study concludes that during the era he writes about it was religion and ethnicity, as much as race, that determined who became slaves.

From the sixteenth to the nineteenth centuries Davis estimates that a million or more Europeans were captured by North African slave traders and sold as slaves to Islamic countries. Davis remarks that the living and working conditions of European slaves sold into Africa and the Ottoman Empire were no better than black slaves sold into the Americas. "While African slaves did grueling labor on sugar and cotton plantations in the Americas, European Christian slaves were often worked just as hard and as lethally - in quarries, in heavy construction, and above all rowing the corsair galleys themselves" ("WHEN EUROPEANS WERE SLAVES," researchnews.osu.edu).

Slaves from much of Europe were sold to the Muslims through regular slave trading networks long before the period written about by Davis. "Before the tenth century the Muslims generally bought Christian Europeans as slaves.... By the tenth century, Slavs became the most numerous imported group.... during the late Middle Ages, until the fall of Granada in the late fifteenth century, most slaves of the... Muslims were Christians from the northern kingdoms..." (William Phillips, *Slavery from Roman Times to the Early Transatlantic Trade*, p. 69,

cited by Michael Hoffman II, "They Were White and They Were Slaves," p. 3).

Islam has a long history of enslaving conquered populations, slave raiding, as well as purchasing slaves. Women captives were often consigned to brothels or harems. The recorded mortality rate among slaves of Islamic owners was high ("The Role of Islam in African Slavery," [africanhistory.about.com](http://africanhistory.about.com)). It's believed that 2 million persons were enslaved in the Sokoto Caliphate in West Africa in the 1790s ("Slavery," [en.wikipedia.org](http://en.wikipedia.org)).

The Coptic Orthodox Church is said to have participated in the slave trade by emasculating young males from Nubia and Abyssinia and selling them as Eunuchs in the Ottoman Empire. Only ten percent who underwent this brutal treatment survived the operation ("Slavery in the Ottoman Empire," [en.wikipedia.org](http://en.wikipedia.org)).

The enslavement of the Indians by the Spanish, Portuguese, British, French and others helped decimate American Indian populations in much of the Western Hemisphere. For example, in Brazil, "The Native Americans died in large numbers, both because of slave raiding, mistreatment, and the lack of resistance to European diseases" ("Brazilian Slavery," [histclo.com](http://histclo.com)). The treatment of black African slaves in the Caribbean and South American sugar plantations was often even considerably more brutal than was typical in the United States, during the era in which slavery was officially sanctioned there.

During the era of the trans-Atlantic slave trade (early 1600s to the nineteenth century) about 12 million Africans (estimates vary) were transported as slaves to the Americas ("Atlantic Slave Trade," [en.wikipedia.org](http://en.wikipedia.org)). Slavery was endemic in Africa, as nearly everywhere else in the world, and those conquered in tribal warfare were often enslaved. It became profitable to sell enslaved captives to European slave traders during the Atlantic slave trading era. When the British outlawed the slave trade (but not slavery) in 1807, the King of Bonny (now in Nigeria) complained, "We think this trade must go on. That is the verdict of our oracle and the priests. They say that your country, however great, can never stop a trade ordained by God himself" (cited in "Atlantic Slave Trade," [en.wikipedia.org](http://en.wikipedia.org)).

People often think of slavery, especially in the Americas, only in terms of black slaves from Africa. The truth is, both blacks and whites, and peoples of other ethnicities, have been subjected to slavery of various descriptions in virtually every period of history. Not only blacks from Africa, but an untold number of whites, from the British Isles, especially, were sent west into slavery in the Americas during the Atlantic slave trading era.

It's been estimated that 80,000 to 130,000 Irish were sent into slavery in America and the West Indies in roughly just one decade of the the seventeenth century, namely, the years 1651-1660 ("England's Irish Slaves", Robert E. West). But it was not just the Irish who were sold as slaves. Scots, Welsh, English and some from mainland Europe were also sent to the west as slaves (cf. "White Slavery, what the Scots already know," Kelly D. Whittaker; *White Cargo: The Forgotten History of Britain's White Slaves in America*, Don Jordan and Michael Walsh; reviewed by Thomas Jackson at [abundanthope.net](http://abundanthope.net)).

Textbooks have usually given scant attention, if any at all, to the white slave trade. And when it is mentioned, it is often dismissed as a relatively innocuous form of temporary slavery known "indentured servitude." While some sources imply that most of the Europeans who came to America as slaves were "indentured servants" ("Indentured Servant," [en.wikipedia.org](http://en.wikipedia.org)), this is disputed by others.

In any case, being sent as a slave, indentured or not, from the British Isles to America often meant a lifetime of being enslaved, and not infrequently, a very short lifetime.

Various sources indicate that a large number of whites were sent to the British North American colonies as slaves beginning early in the history of the colonies. "The first slaves imported into the American colonies were 100 White children. They arrived during Easter, 1619, four months before the arrival of a the first shipment of Black slaves. Mainstream histories refer to these laborers as indentured servants, not slaves, because many agreed to work for a set period of time in exchange for land and rights.

“Yet in reality, indenture was enslavement, since slavery applies to any person who is bought and sold, chained and abused, whether for a decade or a lifetime. Many white people died long before their indenture ended or found that no court would back them when their owners failed to deliver on promises. Tens of thousands of convicts, beggars, homeless children and other undesirable English, Scottish, and Irish lower class were transported to America against their will to the Americas on slave ships (“Irish Slaves – What The History Books Will Never Tell You,” *radio2hot.wordpress.com*).

Another author states, “...in most cases from the 17th and 18th centuries, Irish slaves were nothing more than human cattle” (John Martin, “The Irish Slave Trade – The Forgotten ‘White’ Slaves,” *globalresearch.ca*).

“Upon arrival in America, White slaves were ‘put up for sale by the ship captains or merchants... Families were often separated under these circumstances when wives and offspring were auctioned off to the highest bidder.’ “ (Foster R. Dulles, *Labor in America: A History*, p. 7, cited in “They Were White and They Were Slaves,” Michael Hoffman II, p. 25).

“White people who were passed over for purchase at the point of entry were taken into the back country by ‘soul drivers’ who herded them along like cattle to a ‘Smithfield market’ and then put them up for auction at public fairs. ‘Prospective buyers felt their muscles, checked their teeth... like cattle...’ (Sharon Salinger, *To Serve Well and Faithfully, Labor and Indentured Servants in Pennsylvania, 1682-1800*, p. 97). ‘...indentured servants were sold at auction, sometimes after being stripped naked.’ (Roediger, p. 30). ‘We were... exposed to sale in public fairs as so many brute beasts’ (Ekirch, p. 129).

” ‘Contemporary accounts likened them to livestock auctions. “(They) are brought in here,” a person noted, ‘and sold in the same manner as horses or cows in our market or fair.’ (William) Green recalled: ‘They search us there as the dealers in horses do those animals in this country, by looking at our teeth, viewing our limbs...’ (William Green, *Sufferings of William Green*, p. 6 and Ekirch, p. 123).

“ 'They are frequently hurried in droves, under the custody of severe brutal drivers into the Back Country to be disposed of as servants.' (Jernegan, p. 225)” (*ibid.*).

As often in history, in this period it was not only ethnicity or religion, but class, social and economic status, that often made the difference between being free or being made a slave. Sources state that no one really knows how many Irish, Scots, English and other whites were forced into slavery through the policies of the British government during its slave-trading era, as record keeping in such matters was often virtually non-existent. According to various sources there were more whites sold into slavery in the America's in the seventeenth century than black Africans (cf. “Irish Slavery in America,” [irisheyesofva.com](http://irisheyesofva.com)). The selling of Irish slaves by the British is said to have continued from as early as 1621 into the nineteenth century. It's claimed that in the North American British colonies, “...in 1775 there were as many or more notices for white as black runaways” (“White Slaves,” review by Thomas Jackson, [abundanthope.net](http://abundanthope.net)), although this claim is open to question. Yet, there is no doubt that whites continued to be among those enslaved even into the nineteenth century in what had been the British colonies in North America.

Indeed, by far the larger part of mankind were enslaved. “... at the beginning of the nineteenth century an estimated three-quarters of all people alive were trapped in bondage against their will either in some form of slavery or serfdom” (David P. Forsythe, *Encyclopedia of Human Rights*, vol. 1; cited in “History of Slavery,” [en.wikipedia.org](http://en.wikipedia.org).)

In the latter part of the eighteenth century opposition to slavery grew in Britain, influenced greatly by evangelical Christians, including the influential politician, William Wilberforce. In 1807 he published a book, *A Letter on the Abolition of the Slave Trade*. Among the arguments he advanced against the slave trade, he stated, “...if we are not blind to the course of human events, as well as utterly deaf to the plain instructions of Revelation, we must believe that a continued course of wickedness, oppression and cruelty, obstinately maintained in spite of the fullest knowledge and loudest warnings, must infallibly bring down

upon us the heaviest judgments of the Almighty” (p. 350).

The same year the British Parliament passed legislation outlawing the slave trade. Wilberforce and others continued to work to abolish slavery itself, and in 1833 Parliament passed the Slavery Abolition Act. Other nations in Europe were influenced to begin putting an end to legal slavery, as well. While these actions mitigated the evil, slavery has not ended.

As mentioned above, many of those sent from the British Isles to North America in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were “convicts,” people who had been arrested for petty crimes, or political prisoners. After American independence, these undesirables were often shipped off to Australia, and put to work as slaves under appalling conditions (cf. “Convict slavery in Australia,” [ironbarkresources.com](http://ironbarkresources.com)). From 1788 to 1868 approximately 162,000 such convicts were sent to penal colonies in Australia by the British government (“Convicts in Australia,” [en.wikipedia.org](http://en.wikipedia.org)).

“Most of the convicts were thieves who had been convicted in the great cities of England. Only those sentenced in Ireland were likely to have been convicted of rural crimes. Transportation was an integral part of the English and Irish systems of punishment. It was a way to deal with increased poverty and the severity of the sentences for larceny. Simple larceny, or robbery, could mean transportation for seven years. Compound larceny – stealing goods worth more than a shilling (about \$50 in today's money) – meant death by hanging” (“Convicts and the British colonies in Australia,” [www.australia.gov.au](http://www.australia.gov.au)).

“Convict labour was used to develop the public facilities of the colonies – roads, causeways, bridges, courthouses and hospitals. Convicts also worked for free settlers and small land holders” (*Ibid.*). “...convicts were often subject to cruelties such as leg-irons and the lash” (*ibid.*). “One convict described the working thus: 'We have to work from 14–18 hours a day, sometimes up to our knees in cold water, 'til we are ready to sink with fatigue... The inhuman driver struck one, John Smith, with a heavy thong.' “ (*ibid.*)

“Despite the belief that convict women during the transportation period were all prostitutes, no women were transported for that offence. The majority of women sent to Australia were convicted for what would now be considered minor offences (such as petty theft), most did not receive sentences of more than seven years. Many women were driven to prostitution upon their arrival in Australia as means of survival because they were often required to house themselves or buy clothing and bedding on their own” (“Convict Women in Australia,” en.academic.ru).

In Africa and many other places, too, slavery continued even after the end of the trans-Atlantic slave trade. “The history of slavery and abolition is not confined to the Americas, but also extends to millions of slaves in Africa, Asia and the Middle East. When the Trans-Atlantic slave trade finally came to an end in the 1860s, both slavery and slave trading remained widespread across most of Africa” (“Call for Papers: Slavery, Migration, and Contemporary Bondage in Africa,” [www.africa.upenn.edu](http://www.africa.upenn.edu)). The same source points out that slavery continues even now to be a reality in much of Africa. But the evil is certainly not confined to Africa, as we will see.

The brutality endured by the enslaved populations of captive countries, ethnic and social groups, and war prisoners by the Germans and Japanese in World War II was apocalyptic in its nature. Millions died in slave camps or captive territories as a result of a range of cruelties, including forced migration, forced labor, starvation, and deliberate extermination over a relatively brief period of time.

The Stalinist gulags (prison work camps) in the Soviet Union were nearly, if not altogether, as bad. But victims in the latter case were mostly in their own country at the hands of their own people. It's been estimated that more than 60 million perished in the slave camps of the Soviet gulag.

Given the nature of communist rule in the Soviet Union, China and other countries, one could consider much of the population in those countries as having been enslaved. The brutal murders, imprisonments, forced starvation, and other terroristic actions were designed to keep everyone in line with government policies which

abrogated personal liberty to a very large degree, if not altogether, for the great majority of the populations.

Despite the seemingly ubiquitous nature of slavery in the world's history, liberty seems to be an innate desire in human beings. The quest for liberty is what drove many of the early colonists to American shores. The nation was forged and established on ideals of individual liberty; liberty that had been largely denied in places from which the pilgrims had come.

Yet the awful stain of slavery burdened the national conscience even as the nation was being founded on the ideal of liberty. Although the Declaration of Independence had stated that "all men... are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights..., among... [them] liberty," liberty was denied to many Americans by the despicable, vile, unconscionable institution of slavery as then being practiced. Although by the late eighteenth century the majority of slaves in the British North American colonies were of black ancestry, some were American Indians, and as discussed earlier, many whites also continued to be enslaved ("Slavery in the United States," Wikipedia.org; see other sources noted above as well).

Slavery grossly violated the principle of liberty on which the nation was founded, and should have violated the conscience of every person who had a heart. Sometimes slavery has been romanticized, whitewashed and sanitized in the popular media. Such films as *Gone With the Wind* come to mind.

But the romanticized slavery of popular imagination is nothing like the real slavery experienced by those who were so oppressed. Real slavery was more often than not inexpressibly brutal, oppressive, cruel, and evil in the extreme. And even where there was a relatively benign slave master, slaves were still slaves. They were anything but free.

Some have sought to defend slavery as it was practiced in the United States and elsewhere by appealing to Scripture. But liberty was denied to many Americans during the slavery era by an institution of chattel slavery that bore little or no resemblance to the well-regulated

bondage described in the law of the Old Testament.

While numerous cultures the world over have been guilty of enslaving peoples and treating them with unconscionable brutality and abuse, for a Christian professing nation to do so while expressing in its founding documents the concept of liberty for all was a blatant contradiction to its espoused ideals. The fact that most (but by no means all) slave owners were white and most slaves in the United States, after its establishment as an independent nation, were of black African descent, added a racial component to the problem that only made it more intractable, but no less unjust.

This contradiction was not lost on many Americans. Over time, opposition to slavery grew, especially in Northern states, largely influenced by the Bible. "... a wave of Protestant revivals known as the Second Great Awakening swept the country during the first third of the nineteenth century. In New England, upstate New York, and those portions of the Old Northwest above the 41<sup>st</sup> parallel populated by the descendants of New England Yankees, this evangelical enthusiasm generated a host of moral and cultural reforms. The most dynamic and divisive of them was abolitionism. Heirs of the Puritan notion of collective accountability that made every man his brother's keeper, these Yankee reformers repudiated Calvinist predestination, preached the availability of salvation to anyone who truly sought it, urged converts to abjure sin, and worked for the elimination of sins from society. All people were equal in God's sight; the souls of black folks were as valuable as those of whites; for one of God's children to enslave another was a violation of the Higher Law, even if it was sanctioned by the Constitution" (*Battle Cry of Freedom*, James M. McPherson, p. 8).

Legal slavery in the United States was finally abolished through a bloody civil war in which about 600,000 Americans died. Abraham Lincoln expressed the view that the Civil War was Divine punishment for the sin of slavery. In his second Inaugural Address he spoke of "this terrible war, as the woe due to those by whom the offense [of slavery] came."

While some forms of slavery were countenanced under the Old

Covenant, the manner in which it was regulated greatly discouraged its practice. For example, among other restrictions, it was forbidden to return an escaped slave to his master (Deuteronomy 23:15-16). Thus, any discontented slave in Israel could simply leave, so far as the law was concerned, and claim his freedom.

The laws limiting and regulating slavery, like other of God's laws, were often ignored among the Israelites and Jews, just as they have been among many professing Christians (Jeremiah 34:13-17; cf. "Slavery and the Jews," *The Cambridge World History of Slavery*, ch. 20).

The theme that runs through the Bible from beginning to end is ultimate liberty, freedom from tyranny and every other form of enslavement (Exodus 20:1-2; Isaiah 61:1; Romans 8:19-21; Galatians 4:1-9).

There are some even among professing Christians who seek to justify and defend slavery. To those who seek to defend human slavery I have this response: Perhaps those who are enamored with the idea of others being enslaved will have an opportunity to experience it for themselves.

I suppose you will think it's a grand thing to be taken in the hold of a ship to a far away land, in fear for your life constantly (Deuteronomy 28:47-48, 65-68). To endure forced labor beyond the limit of endurance (Lamentations 5:13). To have your wife raped (Deuteronomy 28:30; Lamentation 5:11). To have your children sold as slaves (Joel 3:3).

Since you think slavery is so wonderful, I'm sure you would shed no tears (Lamentations 3:48-52), nor pray for deliverance (1 Kings 8:46-53).

If you would not desire to be a slave, why would you be content to see others in slavery? (Matthew 7:12). If you cannot have mercy for others, then expect none from God (Jeremiah 34:13-20; Matthew 5:7; 9:13; James 2:13).

The God of the Bible is a God of liberty, who freed the captives

(Exodus 20:2), and will free them (Isaiah 49:25-26; 61:1; Jeremiah 23:7-8; 30:10; Luke 4:18; 2 Corinthians 3:17; Galatians 5:1; Hebrews 2:15). "... the creation itself also will be delivered from the bondage of corruption into the glorious liberty of the children of God" (Romans 8:21).

When Jesus Christ intervenes in world affairs, and sets up the Kingdom of God on the earth, he will destroy oppressors off of the face of the earth (Psalm 9:8-9; Psalm 10:12-18; 12:5; 72:4; 103:6; 146:7; Proverbs 3:31-32; 14:31; 22:16, 22-23; 28:16; Ecclesiastes 5:8; Isaiah 14:4; 16:4; 19:20; 33:15; 58:6; Jeremiah 7:6-7; 21:12; 22:3; 30:20; 50:33-34; Ezekiel 18:5-9; 45:8; Amos 4:1-2; Zechariah 7:10; 9:8; Malachi 3:5).

Today, although slavery is said to be "outlawed" in every country (wikipedia.org, "slavery"), human slavery is still endemic in much of the world, including the United States, Israel, and many other nations. Various estimates exist for the number of people enslaved currently worldwide, up to more than 35 million (www.globalsslaveryindex.org). But these estimates probably are low, given the fact that most of the slave trade occurs illegally and is hidden from view. "Due to the illegal nature of human trafficking, its exact extent is unknown" (wikipedia.org, "slavery").

The worst offenders, according the U.S. State Department, are Russia, China, Uzbekistan, Cuba, North Korea, Sudan, Zimbabwe, and several countries in the Middle East (wikipedia.org, "slavery"). Yet, India is estimated by the Walk Free Foundation to have more than 14 million enslaved. Haiti and a number of African nations rank high on their list of offenders in terms of the percentage of population enslaved (2014 Global Slavery Index). In the Middle East, in areas controlled by Islamist organizations such as ISIS, women and children are sold openly as sex slaves (*Daily Mail.com*). The *Daily Mail* reports that middle aged women are sold for around \$40 U.S., and children bring four times as much.

Despite the stain of slavery on the national record of the United States, Great Britain and other nations descended largely from Anglo-Saxon forebears, they have been bastions of liberty for more than 200

years. Liberty of a kind rarely matched in human history.

But the liberty that was instrumental in forming the basis for the remarkable blessings and prosperity our peoples have enjoyed for some 200 years is fast slipping away. We've turned our backs on the Creator who is the author of every blessing, including liberty.

Scripture warns us where our sins will lead if we do not repent. "Because you did not serve the Lord your God with joy and gladness of heart, for the abundance of everything, therefore you shall serve your enemies, whom the Lord will send against you..." (Deuteronomy 28:47-48). Other Scriptures give more details concerning the slavery that awaits our peoples unless we repent.

After a brief period of punishment, mercifully God will redeem our peoples out of captivity and restore their freedom. The festivals of God, including the weekly Sabbath, the Passover, the Feast of Unleavened Bread, Pentecost, the Feast of Trumpets, Atonement, Tabernacles, and the Last Great Day, picture in various ways the ultimate liberty not only of physical Israel, but of all peoples and nations who are willing to learn and practice God's way of life. "Proclaim liberty throughout all the land" is one of the themes of these festivals (Leviticus 25:10).

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