



The Religious Stockholm Syndrome

...a man is not justified by observing the law, but by faith in Jesus Christ. So we, too, have put our faith in Christ Jesus that we may be justified by faith and not by observing the law, because by observing the law no one will be justified (Galatians 2:16).

I do not set aside the grace of God, for if righteousness could be gained through the law, Christ died for nothing! (Galatians 2:21).

How can anyone, reading such passages (and there are many in the New Testament), justify requiring the performance of religiously mandated deeds, in the name of our Lord and Savior? Given the clear, line-in-the-sand message of the new covenant, how can anyone knowingly continue to be enslaved to a performance-based religion? What part of the good news is unclear?

Given the absolutely uncompromising message of faith alone, grace alone and Christ alone, how can anyone or any group remain locked into (or up by) rituals and ceremonies, while at the same time cosmetically sprinkling the word “grace” within their legalistic religion?

Some have been captive to legalism for so long that they have come to sympathize with their captor, be that taskmaster a beloved pastor, revered founder of a movement, or a denomination to which their family has always belonged. Some have inhabited the swamps of bad news religion for so long that no matter how badly they may have been treated, they come, in a twisted and perverted way, to idealize and idolize the law that keeps them enslaved. Even when some are rescued from such spiritually toxic places I have heard them comment about their feelings regarding the laws and their religious captors who once held them in bondage—“It really wasn’t that bad.”

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Psychological terminology used to describe the justification of abuse is called the Stock-

holm Syndrome. A mental aberration that causes a person who is abused and mistreated to demonstrate a fanatical devotion to his or her captor, the Stockholm Syndrome leads to a devotion that is beyond all reason. This sick and warped mental condition often occurs in victims who are physically battered, as well as in cases of incest, rape and kidnapping.

The Stockholm Syndrome, also called Bonding-to-the-Perpetrator, was so named after bank robbers in Stockholm, Sweden held bank employees hostage in August, 1973. After they were released, victims had become so emotionally attached to their captors that they defended them.



Kreditbanken building in Stockholm, Sweden scene of the 1973 bank robbery/hostage incident where the term “Stockholm Syndrome” was first coined.

Patty Hearst is often cited as the textbook example of the Stockholm Syndrome. In 1974 the millionaire heiress was kidnapped by the Symbionese Liberation Army (SLA). After being held captive for two months Patty Hearst appeared to willingly take part in a robbery orchestrated by the SLA. Thirty-five years later the debate still rages about her innocence or complicity—she was convicted for her actions (a sentence that was later commuted) after her unsuccessful

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defense claimed she was coerced into aiding the SLA.

A more recent example involved Elizabeth Smart, a 14-year-old girl, taken from her home in Salt Lake City in 2002 by a fundamentalist polygamist homeless preacher.

After being held hostage for two months, Elizabeth apparently stopped trying to escape, and eventually claimed to be the daughter of the man who kidnapped her. Then, after she had been held captive for nine months, when passersby saw her on a street in Sandy, Utah, a police officer caught up with her and asked her

Photograph of Patty Hearst in front of the insignia of the Symbionese Liberation Army holding an assault rifle. This image was taken during Hearst's time with the SLA and was released to the media to advertise that she had apparently joined their organization.



months and seasons and years! I fear for you, that somehow I have wasted my efforts on you (Galatians 4:8-11).

How can we understand the mystery of someone who appears to willingly remain within religious legalism? How can we com-

knew where the next meal would come from—in Egypt we didn't have to go out looking for manna every day." When they actually were living free, some of the Is-

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if she was Elizabeth Smart. Responding to the police officer, she initially denied being "that girl who ran away." After more questioning, she finally admitted to being Elizabeth Smart.

Paul was appalled that the Galatians, who had known freedom in Christ, had actually returned to religious legalism. He was beside himself—how could such a thing happen? They knew they belonged to Christ. Why were they acting like they didn't?

Formerly, when you did not know God, you were slaves to those who by nature are not gods. But now that you know God—or rather are known by God—how is it that you are turning back to those weak and miserable principles? Do you wish to be enslaved by them all over again? You are observing special days and

prehend those who actually defend religious abuse they and their family experienced?

"The Egyptian Slave-Drivers Weren't That Bad!"

The Stockholm Syndrome happened to some of the Israelites after God rescued them from the slavery of Egypt. They found themselves unable to cope with their freedom, and actually preferred the security of the status-quo life they had back in Egypt. Egypt was a place of physical and spiritual misery, but many of the Israelites had come to be habituated to it—slavery was all they had known—it was "normal."

As long as the Israelites were in Egypt, they knew what to expect. "Sure," they could have reasoned, "life was tough, but we at least

raelites started to think that those Egyptians weren't "that bad." They started to defend their former captors and the abusive physical and religious bondage that enslaved them. It didn't take much persuasion for them to bow down to the golden calf Aaron made (Exodus 32:1-5).

The Israelites had been born into bondage in Egypt—just like anyone today who is born into an abusive religious system. All they had ever known of "god" was a culture wholly given over to worship of animals, spiritual fraud, lies, trickery and deception. When they thought of a higher power, they thought of religious rules, regulations and rituals.

When the one true God actually gave them freedom, some of the Israelites, like the Galatians, wanted to return to the secure world of performance-based religion. Within Christendom today, the same dynamic plays itself out when the reality of God's grace is preached and proclaimed.

As long as the Israelites were in Egypt, they knew what to expect. "Sure," they could have reasoned, "life was tough, but we at least knew where the next meal would come from...."



When confronted with God's grace and the freedom in Christ it gives (Galatians 5:1), Christless religion responds in a variety of ways, with denials somewhat like the Stockholm Syndrome:

- "Well, we appreciate this grace 'thing'—but you know, we think we are blessed when our ways please God. We keep all of the ten commandments. We obey God's law." **Comment:** So salvation and justification before God is really all about human performance—and not about God's grace?

- "We think that God helps those who help themselves—we aren't going to take advantage of this grace thing and overdo it."

Comment: What biblical passage warns us to be careful about enjoying God's love, insisting that we are cautious about trusting him?

- "God gets you started in Christianity. Sure, Jesus died on the cross, but that was the down payment. Now it's up to us to keep up the monthly payments. We can't mock God and expect him to keep loving us unless we earn his approval." **Comment:** How can we mock God if we take him at his word? Speaking of mocking God, wouldn't that include twisting the intent of his promise to us?

- "You have to understand what God's grace is. God's grace gives us the power to keep the law." **Comment:** Paul's words say it best...*if righteousness could be gained by the law, Christ died for nothing* (Galatians 2:21).

- "In our church we want to make sure that we don't offend God, so we would rather err on the side of the law. We work as if everything depended on us, and we pray as if everything depended on God." **Comment:** What exactly do you mean by "as if?" Either everything depends on God or it doesn't.

Legalistic religion often says it knows that humans cannot be saved by some version of works-righteousness, but then by its attitudes and actions it lives as if the law saves and justifies us before God. Christless religion brainwash-

es those who are addicted to it and enslaved by it so that no matter what terminology might be used, when the rubber hits the road, people revert to the idolatrous idea that law-keeping is what really saves them.

In or Out—There's No Compromise With Christless Religion

When God took Israel out of Egypt, he didn't give any options for those who, like Lot's wife (Genesis 19:26) looked back, not quite

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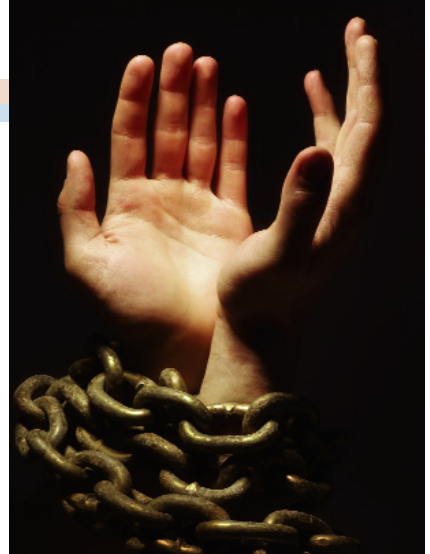
convinced that Egypt was "all that bad." The Israelites left in a hurry. No provision was made to counsel those who weren't quite ready to accept freedom. You either left...or you didn't. It wasn't grace *plus* law. It wasn't freedom *plus* bondage. It was one or the other—either freedom or religious bondage. It was decision time. It was time to lose your religion.

If you can't picture the immediacy of the Exodus, then think back to your favorite western movie. Remember where the wagon trains were often ambushed? Right in the middle of the river. They were half way between one shore and the other. There's a great deal of theological truth about such a picture.

Given this illustration, no one lives in the middle of a river of belief. The middle of a river is a place of death—no one survives such a place. All the wagon trains going west knew that—they got out of the middle of the river as quickly as they could, because it was a dangerous, vulnerable place to be.

Remember the confrontation on Mount Carmel between Elijah, the prophet of God, and the 450 prophets of Baal?

Elijah went before the people and said, *'How long will you waver between two opinions? If the Lord is God, then follow him; but if Baal is God, follow him'* (1 Kings 18:21).



Jesus is the ultimate and complete cure for anyone who suffers from a Religious Stockholm Syndrome. Jesus came to proclaim freedom for the oppressed and to set prisoners free (Luke 4:18). He alone can heal us from twisted and perverted thinking that may cause us to worship the created (religion) rather than the Creator (Romans 1:25).

Turn to him, completely, without reservation. Ask him to help you lose your religion, and leave it behind. Stop looking back. He'll help you recover from warped ideas about what your devotion to religion was all about. He'll lead you to the Promised Land. □

—Greg Albrecht

ONLINE INTERVIEW
"CAUGHT IN THE CROSSFIRE"
www.ptm.org/Awad

Don't miss Greg Albrecht's insightful interview with Dr. Bishara Awad, President of Bethlehem Bible College—a Bible college serving Palestinians. In a dark world of religious and ethnic conflict between Jew and Muslim, Dr. Awad and Bethlehem Bible College provide a shining light of the gospel of Jesus Christ.