

# ESCAPE from SLAVERY

BY GREG ALBRECHT

**H**arriet remembered the suffering. She remembered being treated as an animal, used only for work and breeding. She knew all about life on the plantation, where the “big house” of ease and privilege was built on the poverty and misery produced by the slavery into which she was born.

She never forgot the beatings. Harriet was twelve years old when she was helping to defend another slave who had run away and was being punished. An overseer hit her in the head with a two-pound weight intended for her fellow slave—a blow that caused her to suffer periodic black-outs for the rest of her life.

In 1850 Harriet Tubman (1820-1913) escaped life as a slave and found safety in Philadelphia, working as a maid. But the hopelessness and brutality of life as a slave haunted her, and she could not put the misery of others out of her mind. Only a decade remained before the American Civil War (1861-1865) started, but Harriet did not wait for the Army of the North to help emancipate some of her fellow slaves.

She joined the Underground Railroad, a secret network set up to help slaves escape bondage in the South and enjoy freedom in the North. For an escaped slave, the experience of leaving freedom behind took enormous courage. During her trips back into the South she went undercover, in disguise, risking her own life in order to lead others to safety.

# RESCUE FROM RELIGIOUS LEGALISM AND ALL OF ITS BONDAGE INVOLVES A LOSS—LOSS OF RELIGIOUS IDENTITY, LOSS OF A DISTINCTIVE AND SPECIAL CULTURE, IN MANY CASES A LOSS OF FAMILY AND FRIENDS AND OFTEN A LOSS OF HISTORY AND TRADITION ROOTED IN RELIGIOUS BONDAGE.

For Harriet, who had tasted freedom in the North, the oppression of human suffering must have been a dark spiritual cloud, suspended by the heavy, humid air of the South. Plantations where Africans toiled were human junk yards of crippled bodies and crushed spirits. It seemed that God had for some reason closed his ears, not hearing the desperate cries of the slaves...in a similar way that he had seemed, initially at least, deaf to the cries of suffering coming out of Egypt some 3,300 years before.

## After Slavery

Harriet Ross was born into slavery, in 1820, in the state of Maryland. At the age of 25 she married John Tubman, a free African American, and five years later she made her escape in the middle of the night, following the North Star to freedom in Pennsylvania.

Harriet could have pursued many goals once she was free, not the least of which was her own education. She was denied the opportunity for education as a slave, and now, being free, she could have pursued her own personal enrichment. But Harriet remained illiterate all her life, for she believed the plight of the slavery of others was more

important than her own education.

She felt a spiritual calling to do what she could for others who were still suffering in bondage. She believed that God would support her efforts to help free others. Harriet believed that there's always a place for someone who stands for their convictions.

The fact that she was just an ordinary looking person, not at all striking in her personal appearance, probably aided her in her secretive exploits. Reports of her forays into the South to rescue others speak of her utter indifference for her own safety—of her grim determination to do whatever was needed to help others escape.

During the 1850s she found sympathetic Christians, notably Quakers, who supported her efforts. Before the outbreak of hostilities between the North and the South, Harriet Tubman took more than 20 trips into hostile territory, becoming personally responsible for leading more than 300 slaves to freedom. As a “conductor” on the Underground Railroad she never lost a “passenger.” She helped to rescue some of her siblings between 1850 and 1854, and her then 70-year-old parents in 1857. She would have rescued her husband,

but she found out that he had taken another wife.

Harriet soon gained the nickname of “Moses,” for her extraordinary courage of returning into her homeland of slavery and helping to free her people. She was also dubbed “General” Tubman by the militant abolitionist John Brown, with whom she worked in Canada.

## Clever Disguises

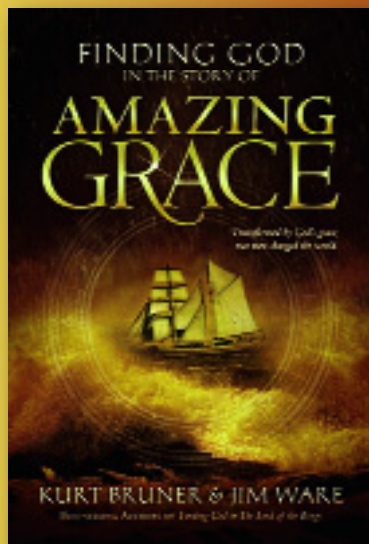
As Harriet Tubman's reputation grew, so too did the offers of rewards for her capture. At one point they totaled about \$40,000. She was a clever and cunning person, able to escape notice by blending in with the cultural landscape. She often carried two chickens with her, and if she felt in danger from someone scrutinizing her, she put on a show, appearing to lose her grip on the chickens and then chase after them, to the amusement of would be slave-catchers.

One of her clever disguises involved her assuming and reinforcing the stereotype of a sleepy and lazy slave, sometimes literally sleeping in public places. During one of her incursions into the South she is said to have fallen asleep right under her own *Wanted* poster. She woke up, heard some men standing nearby discussing the poster's message, which, among other things, stated that Harriet Tubman was illiterate. She pulled out a book and feigned reading it, and the ploy worked.

On another occasion, she and the “passengers” on her Underground Railroad were waiting at a literal train station, hoping to catch a train for part of the journey north. However, as she and her small group of escaped slaves arrived she noticed that slave-catchers were watching all the trains leaving for the North. Without missing a beat, so as not to arouse any attention, Harriet took her group on board a south-bound train, going right back into the heartland of slavery,

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later resuming their trip to the North at another station.

Just before the Civil War started, Harriet spoke at meetings on behalf of slaves as well as the rights of women. During the Civil War Harriet served as a cook, nurse, soldier, spy and scout—a special help to Union Forces in the state of Maryland, given her knowledge of the terrain. She helped guide hundreds of people trapped in slavery into Union camps, and in one military exercise alone helped to rescue over 750 slaves.

### Moses and Harriet

There are many times and places for a new Moses, but it takes courage and conviction to recognize and accept the call to serve those in slavery. Harriet Tubman recognized that she could be the right person in the right place at the right time. In a time of great moral crisis, she accepted the role of a servant-leader to her people.

God called Moses to be his earthly leader as he delivered the nation of Israel from the physical slavery and suffering of Egypt. The redemption and salvation of Israel is perhaps the greatest salvation-event of the Old Testament. The physical salvation given to the one nation of Israel through Moses is the bridge that connects us with the spiritual salvation offered to all humanity by Jesus, God in the flesh.

The story in Exodus of the glorious salvation of Israel includes the fact that there were some in Israel who struggled with their new gift of freedom. When some weighed the advantages and disadvantages of slavery and freedom they felt that the immediate, external security offered by the regimented existence of slavery was far superior to the uncertainty of freedom (Exodus 16:2-3).

Spiritual slavery is even more insidious. Spiritual slavery is akin to the Emperor who sincerely believed he was showing off his fine new suit of clothing, only to find that he was, in fact, prancing around in the altogether. The message from

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*William Still—known as father of the Underground Railroad, speaking about Harriet Tubman*



Jesus to one of the seven churches of Revelation comes to mind, “You do not realize that you are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked” (Rev. 3:17).

Religious oppressors have, over the centuries, done a remarkable job persuading followers who were caked in filth, muck and mire from the swamps of religious legalism that they were actually white as the driven snow. This deception makes the task of rescuing someone much more difficult. It is a much easier task to save someone who realizes their pathetic and miserable condition than someone who sees no need to escape the deplorable situation in which they are trapped.

Harriet Tubman is reputed to have said that she had but one major regret: “*If I could have convinced more slaves that they were slaves, I could have freed thousands more.*” Not everything in Egypt seemed oppressive to the Israelites. The slavery of Egypt, regulated and controlled by religion, offered security. There were surely many Israelite slaves who did not want to rock the status quo—they would have preferred to remain within the certainties of the slavery of Egypt rather than risk the uncertainties of freedom in the wilderness.

Rescue from religious legalism and all of its bondage involves a loss—loss of religious identity, loss of a distinctive and special culture,



in many cases a loss of family and friends and often a loss of history and tradition rooted in religious bondage.

### How We Can Help Those in Religious Captivity

Grace is the central theme of the gospel, the foundation of our human relationship with God. Grace is the basis of all of God’s saving activity. Any salvation that comes from God is by grace. Grace is God’s primary attribute—a window into his giving and generous nature.

Conversely, the absence of grace is *de facto* evidence that divine freedom is not present, but rather the misery and wretchedness of religious captivity. Beyond the classical example of the nation of Israel, and her divine deliverance from slavery, there are countless examples in the Bible of men and women who struggled with all kinds of obsessions and dependencies. Time and time again God makes it crystal clear—the only hope any human has from his or her own



addictive and enslaving behaviors is God's loving and forgiving nature.

God's grace is always at odds with accepted human wisdom. The gospel is always turning our world upside down. God's grace is always the other road—the path not humanly taken. The New Testament is filled with paradoxes, divine reversals of the human status quo.

- Those who attempt to save their lives will lose them, while those who are willing to lose their lives in the service of Christ will be given eternal life (Matthew 16:25).

- We may spend our lives accumulating and storing up possessions in banks and safe deposit boxes, but in the end we will either lose what we have gained or our possessions will possess and destroy us. Only treasures and possessions we store in heaven will endure (Matthew 6:19-20).

- Weakness, frailty and poverty are certain signs of failure in the kingdoms of our world, but in the heavenly kingdom God's power is made perfect in human weakness (2 Corinthians 12:9).

- We do not enter into or qualify for God's kingdom of heaven on our own merits, but by God's grace (Ephesians 2:4-10).

- God's kingdom does not belong primarily to those who achieve human greatness, but to those who, by God's grace, humble themselves in service to others (Matthew 18:1-4).

- Christians walk by faith, not by sight (2 Corinthians 5:7).

- Though Jesus was and is rich, he became poor so that through his poverty we might become rich (2 Corinthians 8:9).

Grace itself is perhaps the greatest paradox and most improbable reversal of all. And it is by grace we are saved from religious captivity. When we are confronted with spiritual bondage, our "struggle is not with flesh and blood..." (Ephesians 6:12).

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Physical methods and conventions do not enable us to escape the bondage of religious captivity. We do not escape by virtue of our efforts, for religious bondage is a force that can only be overcome and overthrown by God's grace.

Escape from spiritual slavery is not a matter of seizing freedom for ourselves—it is a matter of God giving to us what we can never imagine, produce, invent, devise, innovate or manipulate. We do not "spring" someone who is held in religious captivity by mailing them the stereotypical cake with a theological hacksaw hidden inside. Clever arguments do not break down the walls of religious prisons.

We don't help someone escape from the religious swamplands they inhabit by devising an ingenious escape route. The nation of Israel learned that lesson, with a pillar of fire by night and a pillar of cloud by day to lead them (Exodus 13:21-22). Moses didn't hire human guides who knew the way through the wilderness—God wanted them to learn that freedom from oppression can only ultimately be found through him.

In a similar way, we can help someone who is a religious captive only if God has freed us. If we have genuinely had the experience of crossing over from death to life (John 5:24), then we can tell others how God rescued us. We know who rescued us and we can direct those in need to him. If God has freed us by his grace, then we know that we cannot keep what he has given to us—we must give it away.

God's grace is not a gift he gives because we earn it, neither is it a gift he gives us so that we can display it on our mantle or place it in a trophy case for others to admire. God's grace is vital and dynamic, God's grace "works" and must be given away. This is the very nature of God. God is the great giver, he is

the great lover who consistently lavishes us with his very best, even when we are obviously unworthy and flagrantly undeserving of his love.

We do not live alone when we live in grace, for just as we receive it from God, so too must we pass it on. The final resting place of grace is not with you or me. We receive grace so that we in turn might dispense it.

We help others who now live in dark places of religious bondage, places that once held us captive, by being who we have been called to be. We help others by living the life that God has given us.

Like Harriet Tubman, we help others by remembering our own spiritual bondage and our own deliverance, by God's grace. We help others who are now religious captives by reflecting the precious Light of Christ—the light he has given us and the light he lives within us. We help those who are spiritually enslaved by lighting a candle, by reflecting the light of Jesus Christ, far more than we do by cursing the darkness of religious captivity. □