

Letting Others Go **FREE**

By James Henderson

Slavery has been in the news recently.

'Human trafficking', as slavery is often called, is on the rise, even in 2014. There have been some sensational cases highlighted in Europe. It is estimated that up to 100,000 girls in India go missing each year. It has also been in the news this year due to the release of the movie, '12 Years a Slave', the story of man who was abducted and forced into slavery in the nineteenth century.

Some years ago I visited one of the infamous slave castles along the coast of Western Africa (see accompanying photos). There slaves were 'stored' prior to being shipped into servitude to the New World (America) and to other places. It was a brilliantly sunny day, and everything seemed right with the world. As my friend Gabriel and I entered

the gates, children were playing in a carefree way, and street vendors tried to sell us richly colored cloths and African souvenirs—it was just like walking into a typical Ghanaian market. I was not prepared for what lay ahead.

The sun was so bright, making everything look clear and the white stone whiter, masking the horrors of the past. We went down to the windowless slave quarters where captives were locked away in appalling squalour, while up above them the governor and his guests were wined and dined; we saw the black holes where offenders were kept prior to execution; we promenaded along the ramparts with the cannons facing seaward; and we visited the women's quarters where mothers and daughters had huddled together in abject misery, in fear of rape, death, and disease. Then we walked silently to the 'Door of No Return': once slaves passed through this dark heavy door

they boarded the ships, never to return to Africa. Some say that even today the sharks follow the same trails of the slave ships, as if instinctively waiting for their human prey to be cast overboard.

Slavery was not new to Africa. The Arab slave trade had been in place for centuries before then, and the Africans themselves had also been guilty of selling each other into bondage. But this was much worse by degree. The obscene estimates are that, during the three centuries of the European slave trade, more than eleven million Africans were taken from their homeland to be slaves in 'civilized' societies.

The ghosts in my mind cried out as I imagined the screams of the women being mistreated callously by the guards, of the old people being beaten to death because they had outlived their commercial usefulness, of the helpless children snatched



violently from their parents, and of the young men whose spirits were broken by the whippings, the torture, and by the hopelessness of it all. In my mind's eye I could see the slaves crushed together in the dark chambers without natural light and sanitation, frightened, sobbing, praying to gods that did not deliver. I could see them walking slowly to the Door of No Return, some being dragged and kicked there, and then the door closes and they are gone forever from their roots.

'I'm sorry', I thought. In a way, because of man's inhumanity to man, I did all this. The reality is that I am still capable of doing it. In fact, I believe all of us, no matter what ethnic or gender background, are capable of enslaving and mistreating others. We can all be tyrants: in the home, at work, wherever. Do you suppress your wife, your husband, your children, those around you? Left to our own devices, chances are each of us is able to be cruel and dangerous to others.

As I went back into the main courtyard I saw a woman, who turned out to be an African American. She was crying uncontrollably. She looked up and glanced at me, and I felt accused—doubly accused, as I am white and male. Suddenly I became defensive. I wanted to tell her: 'I didn't do this. I didn't put my fellow men into servile chains and exploit the women sexually. I didn't do it. I was not even born'. The woman stared at me, no words, and I tried to look away, but couldn't. Maybe this was her grief for a people lost, and I was intruding. 'I DIDN'T DO IT!' I screamed in my head.

For some reason I thought of Jesus. The Bible implies that Jesus took on the guilt of our evil, and not once did he say: 'I didn't do it'. Protesting my innocence was not the point. Feeling sorrow for the suffering that men who looked like me caused, and can still cause, is the point. I didn't do it but I could have, and there but for the grace of God goes all of humankind.

The Christian view is that grace is to do with realising that the dark potential of our human nature is covered by the sacrifice of Christ. Change in the human condition is possible because of grace.

Probably all of us would like to think that collectively we have learned the lesson of slavery in the same way that lessons could have been learned about genocide. Sadly, history indicates that we don't learn these lessons. Genocide is still with us; and slavery has not gone. Why not? The reason is that we do not change. Without spiritual transformation men and women may progress technologically, scientifically, and politically, but human nature does not change.

You have probably gathered that I do not believe in the innate goodness of human beings. I don't. No one is good, actually. Only God is good.

The only way out of our wretchedness is to participate in God's goodness through Christ.

I believe in the goodness of God, and it is only through turning to God and by His intervention in history that a general reversal in our rush to self-destruction can be realised.

Specifically, however, a change in our—yours and mine—human nature is possible now. It is possible right now by turning to Jesus Christ and by acknowledging how he saves us from ourselves; on a personal level accept his transforming grace. That would make a difference in this callous world—to have another Christ-like being walk in it.

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The Door of No Return