

## Gotta Serve Somebody

Romans 6:15–23<sup>1</sup>

### Up from Slavery.

When God entered into a covenant with Abram in Genesis 15, He promised:

<sup>13</sup> ...“Know for certain that your offspring will be sojourners in a land that is not theirs and will be servants there, and they will be afflicted for four hundred years. <sup>14</sup> But I will bring judgment on the nation that they serve, and afterward they shall come out with great possessions.” Genesis 15:13–14 ESV

It’s quite a promise when you stop to think about it. It’s as if God was saying, “Oh, by the way, Abram, your grandchildren to several generations will be slaves in Egypt and ‘afflicted for four hundred years.’” I’m pretty sure some of the “word of faith” people might have a bit of a problem with promises like that, but there it is, the word of the Lord. And all this, we are told a couple verses later, because “the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet complete,” which means that the grandchildren of Abram would suffer affliction for 400 years, while the Amorites maxed out their iniquity tab (which is probably another sermon for another day). Regardless, God kept His promise (because He always does), and in Exodus 2 we’re told that

<sup>23</sup> During those many days the king of Egypt died, and the people of Israel groaned because of their slavery and cried out for help. Their cry for rescue from slavery came up to God.

<sup>24</sup> And God heard their groaning, and God remembered his covenant with Abraham, with Isaac, and with Jacob. <sup>25</sup> God saw the people of Israel—and God knew. Exodus 2:23–25 ESV

Even so, in Exodus 12:

<sup>41</sup> At the end of 430 years, on that very day, all the hosts of the LORD went out from the land of Egypt. Exodus 12:40–41 ESV

So (and this should go without saying), when God told Abraham that his descendants would be slaves, He meant it, and they were. The whole book of Exodus begins with the premise found in chapter 1, verses 12 – 14.

<sup>12</sup> ...the Egyptians were in dread of the people of Israel. <sup>13</sup> So they ruthlessly made the people of Israel work as slaves <sup>14</sup> and made their lives bitter with hard service, in mortar and brick, and in all kinds of work in the field. In all their work **they ruthlessly made them work as slaves.** Exodus 1:12–14 ESV

Then, God delivered them—God saved them; God set them free—bringing them up from slavery in Egypt to “a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey,”<sup>2</sup> as it is described in Exodus, chapter 3. Later, at Sinai, God Himself would describe the event in just this way.

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<sup>1</sup> All Scripture citations, unless otherwise noted, *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016).

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Exodus 3:8.

<sup>2</sup> “I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, **out of the house of slavery.** Exodus 20:2 ESV

But here’s the thing. God delivered Israel from slavery to the Egyptians on the basis of the covenant—the promises—that He had made with Abraham centuries before. He did not deliver them so that they would be free to do as they pleased. He did not save them so that they could make their own choices about how to live and who to serve. He delivered them because He had chosen them long before to be a people for His treasured possession, a people set apart—holy—to Himself. As Moses said in Deuteronomy 4, verse 20:

<sup>20</sup> ...the LORD has taken you and brought you out of the iron furnace, out of Egypt, **to be a people of his own inheritance, as you are this day.** Deuteronomy 4:20 ESV

### **So, You Wanna Go Back to Egypt.**

And this is what God does. By His own sovereign choice He sets His love upon people who are not and never could be worthy of that love; people who are slaves to sin, and at complete enmity with Him. Then, by grace through faith, He delivers them (He delivers us) from bondage to the devil, the world, and even our own flesh. He unites us with Christ in a death like His, crucifying our old self that the body of sin—this mortal body—may be rendered powerless, so that we would no longer be enslaved to sin. So, as Paul wrote in Galatians 5:

<sup>1</sup> **It was for freedom that Christ set us free...**

But he didn’t stop there. Paul continued,

**...therefore keep standing firm and do not be subject again to a yoke of slavery.** Galatians 5:1 NASB3

Or, as we’ve seen in Romans 6:

<sup>12</sup> **...do not let sin reign in your mortal body that you should obey its lusts...** <sup>14</sup> **For sin shall not be master over you, for you are not under law, but under grace.** Romans 6:12–14 NASB

It’s very important that we understand this, because at this point in Romans 6 we are still answering the questions posed in verse 1,

<sup>1</sup> **...Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound?** Romans 6:1 ESV

and again, in verse 15,

<sup>15</sup> **...Are we to sin because we are not under law but under grace?** Romans 6:15 ESV

If the recent history of evangelicalism is not enough to persuade us, then the repetition alone should lead us to conclude that these are questions worthy of our time, and they are, because even though the consistent answer is “By no means,” the flesh—the mortal body—will always try to persuade us otherwise. If we were to take the time to read more of the history of Israel

after the Exodus, something that we've looked at a bit in our evening worship services, we'd see that it was true of them too.

Yes, God delivered them from Egypt to be a people holy to Himself, but they kept on imagining that, since they were free, they could take a path of their own choosing. On a number of occasions, they even imagined that they were better off when they were slaves to the Egyptians. In Numbers 14, they grumbled against Moses and Aaron (something that never ended well for them), and said to them,

<sup>2</sup> ...“Would that we had died in the land of Egypt! Or would that we had died in this wilderness! <sup>3</sup> Why is the LORD bringing us into this land, to fall by the sword? Our wives and our little ones will become a prey. **Would it not be better for us to go back to Egypt?**” <sup>4</sup> And they said to one another, “Let us choose a leader and go back to Egypt.”

Numbers 14:2–4 ESV

In Numbers 11, tired of eating the manna which tasted like wafers made with honey, they wept, saying,

<sup>4</sup> ...“Oh that we had meat to eat! <sup>5</sup> We remember the fish we ate in Egypt that cost nothing, the cucumbers, the melons, the leeks, the onions, and the garlic.” Numbers 11:4–5 ESV

Overlooking the teeny tiny little detail that the Egyptians had

<sup>14</sup> ...made their lives bitter with hard service, in mortar and brick, and in all kinds of work in the field...**[and]**...ruthlessly made them work as slaves. Exodus 1:12–14 ESV

But what's all that compared to an all night leek, onion, and garlic buffet? Of course, we're not all that different.

<sup>23</sup> ...**[The] wages of sin is death...** Romans 6:23 ESV

as we read in Romans 6, verse 23, but still, “Sin can be kind of fun sometimes, and, after all, we're not under law but under grace, right?” After a while, the taste of grace gets boring, and we long for the spiciness of sin. But, regardless of how they framed it, the choice was never about manna versus all the tasty delights of Egyptian cuisine. The real choice before them was the choice between serving the God who graciously delivered them from slavery, and returning to slavery in the land where Pharaoh had commanded them to throw their sons into the Nile to keep the crocodiles happy and satisfied.

As also in Romans 6, verse 16, where the choice is not between the shackles of grace and the joyous freedom to live as we please, rather:

<sup>16</sup> Do you not know that if you present yourselves to anyone as obedient slaves, you are slaves of the one whom you obey, either of sin, **which leads to death...** Romans 6:16 ESV

(and we must not forget that fact),

...or of **obedience, which leads to righteousness?** Romans 6:16 ESV

## Gotta Serve Somebody.

Those, are our choices—not service versus freedom; not drudgery versus joy; not labor versus pleasure—simply, sin (lawlessness<sup>4</sup>), which leads to death, versus obedience, which leads to righteousness. We have not been set free from bondage to sin so that we can choose our path from the myriads of options available, nor have we been set free simply to be free. That’s not how it works. To borrow a chorus from Bob Dylan (no less),

...you’re gonna have to serve somebody, yes you are. You’re gonna have to serve somebody. Well, it may be the devil or it may be the Lord, but you’re gonna have to serve somebody.<sup>5</sup>

Of course, someone will say, “That’s a false dilemma. I do not chose to serve the devil or the Lord. I choose me. I choose to serve myself.” Fair enough. From a certain, worldly point of view, we might possibly grant the statement. But it’s certainly not an option for a follower of Jesus Christ (that is, a believer, a Christian, a disciple), as evident from the very definition of what it means to follow the one who said,

<sup>10</sup> ...“Be gone, Satan! For it is written, “You shall worship the Lord your God **and him only shall you serve.**” Matthew 4:10 ESV

Then there’s Ephesians 2, where the Apostle wrote:

<sup>1</sup> And you were dead in the trespasses and sins <sup>2</sup> in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience—

(that, by the way, would be the Devil),

...the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience— <sup>3</sup> among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind. Ephesians 2:1–3 ESV

Yes indeed...it may be the devil or it may be the Lord, but you’re gonna have to serve somebody.

(a fact that Dylan himself would do well to remember at this point).

## Free to Be Holy.

But we are convinced of better things concerning you, as the Apostle Paul was with the saints at Rome. Looking again at Verses 17 and 18:

<sup>17</sup> But thanks be to God, that you who were once slaves of sin have become obedient from the heart to the standard of teaching to which you were committed, <sup>18</sup> and, **having been set free from sin, have become slaves of righteousness.** Romans 6:17–18 ESV

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<sup>4</sup> Cf. 1 John 3:4.

<sup>5</sup> “Bob Dylan – Gotta Serve Somebody.” n.d. Genius.com. <https://genius.com/Bob-dylan-gotta-serve-somebody-lyrics>.

This, once again, is a pretty good definition of what it means (and what it looks like) to be a Christian. We who were slaves to sin have become obedient from the heart to the teaching we have received. The catechism notes that Christ, by His holy Spirit, makes us wholeheartedly willing and ready from now on to live for Him.<sup>6</sup> But, just one more thing. Since this is a fact, since you **have been** set free from sin and **have become** slaves of righteousness, then verse 19:

<sup>19</sup> ...just as you once presented your members as slaves to impurity and to lawlessness leading to more lawlessness, so now present your members as slaves to righteousness leading to sanctification. Romans 6:19 ESV

As someone has said, holy is something that every Christian can be, because holy is something that every Christian already is. In other words, since you **have been** set free from sin and **have become** a slave of righteousness (and if you are a believer—if you are in Christ; if you are a Christian—then this is unequivocally true), now, present the parts of your body as slaves to righteousness, leading to ἁγιασμός [hagiasmos]—leading to sanctification—leading to holiness.

And how are we to do this? Well, consider how the thing was accomplished in the first place. Back to verse 17.

<sup>17</sup> But thanks be to God, that you who were once slaves of sin **have become obedient from the heart to the standard of teaching to which you were committed...** Romans 6:17–18 ESV

(that “standard of teaching” being the gospel of God, which He promised beforehand through His prophets in the Holy Scriptures,<sup>7</sup> as we saw in Romans, chapter 1),

<sup>18</sup> ...**and, having been set free from sin, have become slaves of righteousness.** Romans 6:17–18 ESV

In the structure of the text here, the phrase “you...have become obedient...to the standard of teaching to which you were committed” is parallel to the phrase, “you...have become slaves of righteousness.” So, we become slaves of righteousness—faithful servants of the Lord Jesus Christ—when we give ourselves wholly in obedience to the word that He has spoken. This is how we are to be sanctified, and of course it is. As Jesus prayed for His people in John 17:

<sup>14</sup> I have given them your word, and the world has hated them because they are not of the world, just as I am not of the world. <sup>15</sup> I do not ask that you take them out of the world, but that you keep them from the evil one. <sup>16</sup> They are not of the world, just as I am not of the world. <sup>17</sup> Sanctify them in the truth; **your word is truth.** John 17:14–17 ESV

We find, then, that just as the people of Israel were delivered from slavery in Egypt so that they could be a people holy to the Lord, we too have been delivered from sin—we have died

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<sup>6</sup> Christian Reformed Church, “The Heidelberg Catechism, Lord’s Day 1”, in *Ecumenical Creeds and Reformed Confessions* ed. CRCNA (Grand Rapids, MI: Faith Alive Publications, 1988), 13.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Romans 1:2.

to sin—so that we are sanctified through obedience to the very same gospel by which we have been saved.

Are we then teaching salvation by works? Of course not. Salvation is by grace alone, through faith alone.

<sup>5</sup> he saved us... Titus 3:5 ESV

as Paul wrote in Titus 3,

...not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit, <sup>6</sup> whom he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, <sup>7</sup> so that being justified by his grace we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life. Titus 3:5–7 ESV

But in the very same letter, just a chapter earlier, he said,

<sup>11</sup> For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men, <sup>12</sup> teaching us... Titus 2:11–12 NKJV

and it's easy to overlook, but this is the word of the Lord, it is the very saving grace of God that teaches us,

...that, denying ungodliness and worldly lusts, we should live soberly, righteously, and godly in the present age, <sup>13</sup> looking for the blessed hope and glorious appearing of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ, <sup>14</sup> who gave Himself for us, that He might redeem us from every lawless deed and purify for Himself His own special people, zealous for good works. Titus 2:11–14 NKJV

Even so,

<sup>19</sup> ...just as you once presented your members as slaves to impurity and to lawlessness leading to more lawlessness, so now present your members as slaves to righteousness leading to sanctification. Romans 6:19 ESV

Because, you're gonna have to serve somebody, and it is written,

“You shall worship the Lord your God **and him only shall you serve.**” Matthew 4:10 ESV

<sup>14</sup> For sin shall not be master over you, for you are not under law, but under grace. Romans 6:14 NASB