

Civil and Religious Liberty: God's Priority

Exodus 8:25-27

Hymns 202, 304

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## **INTRODUCTION**

My father always claimed that we were directly related to Alexander Hamilton, one of the signers of the Declaration of Independence. I have never studied this out for myself, but my father was not one to make up stories, so I have no reason to doubt what he said. Perhaps this is where I get my love of liberty. Regarding religious liberty, Hamilton said this: "Remember civil and religious liberty always go together; if the foundation of the one be sapped, the other will fall of course." Thus it is no surprise that the rights of conscience were given first place in the Bill of Rights in the American Constitution, a document over which Hamilton had significant influence: "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof." More recently, the 45th president of the United States - Mr. Trump, said this: "The United States is founded on the principle that our rights do not come from government; they come from God. This immortal truth is proclaimed in our Declaration of Independence and enshrined in the First Amendment to our Constitution's Bill of Rights. Our Founders understood that no right is more fundamental to a peaceful, prosperous, and virtuous society than the right to follow one's religious convictions." Disagree with him on other issues if you like, but there is no question that in this matter he is absolutely correct.

I say it is an ominous sign of the times that so many of our current political class seem ready to discard the American Constitution, calling it a document created to enshrine white supremacy. Better beware, friends - this pathway, though it might seem to flatter and patronize certain groups of people, will ultimately lead to tyranny and persecution of all people.

The issues of civil and religious liberty are actually front and center in the Bible, but we often fail to recognize this because we have been in the habit, at least until the last year or so, of taking these liberties for granted. We don't have to read very far into

the Bible to see the first denial of civil and religious liberty. I mentioned this a couple of weeks ago, but it bears repeating. Cain killed his brother Abel because he was unable to persuade him through reasoning that his way of worshipping God was equally as valid as that of his brother. God wasn't convinced either, by the way, but Cain couldn't get to Him. From that story, right through the OT and into the NT, we find this great theme, and that is that God is the defender of civil and religious liberty. I want to demonstrate today that the repression of these liberties was the foremost concern in the history of the Exodus. If we had time, we could examine the formation of the nation of Israel in Palestine; we could note that its civil and social structure was designed to maximize liberty on every level. And we could observe how this parallels, in certain key aspects, the formation of our own nation. Perhaps we will do this on another occasion. But let me summarize my introductory remarks by this statement: As has been true throughout the Bible, and now in an amplified way, the final conflict of earth's history will also turn upon these same issues - is there a right way and a wrong way to worship God? And perhaps the most important question - who has the authority to settle that question? Should those who hold a minority opinion on this question be allowed to follow the dictates of their consciences even in times of crisis? These are the main questions to be settled in the final episode of the Great Controversy. But let's take the example of the Exodus this morning. I want to point out how the issue of civil and religious liberty were central concerns of God and His people at that time.

Ex. 7:16 And you shall say to him, 'The LORD, the God of the Hebrews, sent me to you, saying, "Let my people go, that they may serve Me in the wilderness." But so far, you have not obeyed.

Note that civil and religious liberty are placed here side by side - "Let my people go" (Civil liberty) "that they may serve Me" (Religious liberty). Then God presents to Pharaoh the urgency of this decision - But so far you have not obeyed.

### **GENERAL OBSERVATION**

I will point out here, as a general observation that governments are under obligation to God to recognize that He has granted both civil and religious liberty to their subjects. This is true even of governments where the heads of state do not

acknowledge Him. I point this out because when the initial request is made to Pharaoh in Exodus 5:1 - Let my people go that they may hold a feast to me in the wilderness - Pharaoh says this - Who is the LORD, that I should obey his voice and let Israel go? I do not know the LORD, and moreover, I will not let Israel go." How does God respond to this? He does not say - "Oh, pardon me, Pharaoh - I should have known better than to make such a demand of you. Since you don't acknowledge Me as God, then you have every right to treat My servants (and your citizens) however you wish." No, that is not what God said. Even though Pharaoh, king of Egypt did not accept that God had any authority over Him, the obligation to step out from between Him and His servants and to not restrict their freedom was still binding on him, as it is on every government on planet earth today. They too are under obligation to "let go of His people."

### **SPECIFIC OBSERVATIONS**

Now I want to point out some specific things that are especially relevant for our generation in the several encounters between Moses and Aaron and Pharaoh. These come under one main heading, really, and that is this: God is not pleased when civil rulers don't stay in their lane. God has ordained civil government to maintain law and order, but when civil authorities go beyond this, and presume to impede the free exercise of religion, they begin to invite the judgments of God. To start with, let's take a look at Exodus 8:25-27:

Ex. 8:25 ¶ Then Pharaoh called Moses and Aaron and said, "Go, sacrifice to your God within the land."

Ex. 8:26 But Moses said, "It would not be right to do so, for the offerings we shall sacrifice to the LORD our God are an abomination to the Egyptians. If we sacrifice offerings abominable to the Egyptians before their eyes, will they not stone us?"

Ex. 8:27 We must go three days' journey into the wilderness and sacrifice to the LORD our God as he tells us."

(Ex. 8:25-27 ESVi)

**Here, Pharaoh proposes to limit where God's people could worship Him.** Now here is a situation in which Pharaoh would probably say that he was really not restricting religious liberty. Plausible deniability, right? Just go worship in the land,

right? What's the problem? However Moses and Aaron, under inspiration of God, were not buying it. Here was the real problem. This limitation would set them up for persecution, rather than give them the freedom that God stipulated. Sacrificing within the land would expose them to ridicule, contempt, and even violence from the Egyptians, and would deter them from actually engaging freely in the worship of God. By attempting to place limits on the location for worship, he would necessarily limit the manner in which they would feel free to worship. Moses' response to Pharaoh says it all - "we must go three days' journey into the wilderness and sacrifice to the LORD our God as *He tells us.*" So here we see that God would accept no limits on where His people could worship. They were to follow His directions, not those of the state, in this matter.

Now this was not the only limit that Pharaoh sought to place upon the Hebrews. Turn now to Exodus 10:3-11 and see how the situation develops from here.

Ex. 10:3 ¶ So Moses and Aaron went in to Pharaoh and said to him, "Thus says the LORD, the God of the Hebrews, 'How long will you refuse to humble yourself before me? Let my people go, that they may serve me.

Ex. 10:4 For if you refuse to let my people go, behold, tomorrow I will bring locusts into your country,

Ex. 10:5 and they shall cover the face of the land, so that no one can see the land. And they shall eat what is left to you after the hail, and they shall eat every tree of yours that grows in the field,

Ex. 10:6 and they shall fill your houses and the houses of all your servants and of all the Egyptians, as neither your fathers nor your grandfathers have seen, from the day they came on earth to this day.'" Then he turned and went out from Pharaoh.

Ex. 10:7 ¶ Then Pharaoh's servants said to him, "How long shall this man be a snare to us? Let the men go, that they may serve the LORD their God. Do you not yet understand that Egypt is ruined?"

Ex. 10:8 So Moses and Aaron were brought back to Pharaoh. And he said to them, "Go, serve the LORD your God. But which ones are to go?"

Ex. 10:9 Moses said, "We will go with our young and our old. We will go with our sons and daughters and with our flocks and herds, for we must hold a feast to the LORD."

Ex. 10:10 But he said to them, "The LORD be with you, if ever I let you and your little ones go! Look, you have some evil purpose in mind.

Ex. 10:11 No! Go, the men among you, and serve the LORD, for that is what you are asking." And they were driven out from Pharaoh's presence.

First, we shouldn't miss the reason behind the restriction of the liberty of God's people - we see it in vs. 3 in these words - "How long will you refuse to humble yourself before Me?" What is the motivation when governments step in between God and His people and presume to tell them how they must worship Him? Nothing but pure pride and self-exaltation. As I mentioned earlier, government exists to regulate the interactions between people, but it is not, and never has been the prerogative of any man or government to presume to dictate in matters of religion. This matter is between the individual and God only.

But there is another point here that should be made - Notice vs. 8. At first, Pharaoh appears to be cooperating - "Go, serve the LORD your God." Sounds good, doesn't it? But then the question comes - "But which ones are to go?" - Moses' response is clear - everyone was going. There was no one that was to be left behind - the worship of God was for the entire group. Now Pharaoh blows a gasket - **he proposes to restrict WHO will go and worship**, as if the others could get their religious experience by proxy. Now Pharaoh never studied under the modern revolutionary leaders, but he was not uninformed. Besides, he was moved by the same rebellious being that inspired the modern socialist revolutions all over the world. So he knew that the way to conquer a people is to gain control of the minds of their children and youth. Thus he sought to keep them away from the truth, from right religious influences. Now if you are listening carefully, you will recognize that all this sounds strangely familiar. If you would search out the reasons for our national apostasy and decline, you will find a fruitful field in the universities of this land. Social pressure has erected a barrier against the Bible and its truths, especially in secular universities, but also, shamefully, even in many professedly Christian schools. This is equivalent to what Pharaoh proposed to do in the Exodus. "Yes, you old men - you can go worship, but leave the children to me. . ." I'll say as an aside here that we should immediately be suspicious of any movement that specifically targets the younger generation and

teaches it to distrust the wisdom and experience of their parents. Things like this have never ended well. God demonstrates His will in this matter through Moses' response to this base counterproposal of Pharaoh. He would accept no limitation of this kind. All the people were to answer to God for themselves as individuals - men, women, and children, and so they must all appear before God and be instructed of Him - together, as families.

One final point that needs to be made here is found in Ex 10:24-27:

Ex. 10:24 Then Pharaoh called Moses and said, "Go, serve the LORD; your little ones also may go with you; *only let your flocks and your herds remain behind.*"

Ex. 10:25 But Moses said, "You must also let us have sacrifices and burnt offerings, that we may sacrifice to the LORD our God.

Ex. 10:26 Our livestock also must go with us; not a hoof shall be left behind, for we *must take of them to serve the LORD our God, and we do not know with what we must serve the LORD until we arrive there.*"

Ex. 10:27 But the LORD hardened Pharaoh's heart, and he would not let them go.

**Note here that Pharaoh proposed to restrict how the Hebrews would worship God.** He was willing to let the people go, but wanted to restrict what they would take with them. This was also an effort to control the message that would be presented at the worship service. What would the service of God be without a reference to the sacrifice of Christ? It would be little more than an empty form. The gospel of Christ has always been the object of satanic hatred. Even today, people are not so much opposed to the worship of a generic "god", but when you bring up Jesus Christ and His righteousness, then you may expect a total onslaught from the devil. But there was more to this restriction than just a truncation of the message. **It was also an effort to prohibit any further development of truth**, for Moses said to the king - "We do not know with what we must serve the LORD until we arrive there." Moses is opening up the possibility that God would reveal duties to them in the wilderness that they did not know about yet. Pharaoh was not willing that this should happen because it might mean that he would have less control over them. Friends, this idea

of the unfolding of God's truth is one of the pillars upon which the great second advent movement is founded. It is this principle that has necessitated the gift of prophecy throughout sacred history, and especially in these last days. Pharaoh sought to tamp down on this and prevent any further advancement of God's truth among the Hebrews. He must have known that a faithful application of that principle would lessen his despotic control over the Hebrew people.

## **APPLICATION**

Now we are aware, from our study of Revelation, that civil and religious liberty will not always prevail here in the U.S.A., or anywhere else in the world. The question should be asking is, BY WHAT MEANS will this happen? The old Adventist narrative is that persecution will be brought about when religious conservatives put pressure on lawmakers to enact legislation to enforce their doctrines. I wouldn't disagree that these people will be involved. However, I don't think we are paying enough attention to the imminent threats to civil and religious liberty posed by the folks on the opposite end of the political spectrum. The time was when many Adventists believed that we should do all we can to put the most liberal politicians into office, because we thought that this would guarantee our liberties for the longest period of time. Well, friends, I think we have lived long enough to see the fallacy of that thinking. It is high time that we stop paying so much attention to political parties. We had better start taking note of the issues and policies instead. Just because one party or another is in power doesn't signal that its time for a nap. The very restrictions on religious and civil liberty that we see being resisted by God's messengers in the Exodus from Egypt are being enacted before our eyes in our own generation by people who call themselves liberals and progressives. Who would have guessed that? Again, I say, it is high time to awake out of sleep and stand up, not for our rights so much as God's right to our unrestricted service. Here is the real question with which all of us ought to wrestle - how much authority does the civil government have in relation to the worship of God? Does God recognize the right of civil government to place limits on or ban gatherings of His people? If you say, "yes", then I have a follow up question - at what point does that stop? If civil government has the right to limit, ban, or specify certain conditions under which religious gatherings can be held, then why could it not

also specify *what day* we are allowed to worship? How could we logically go along with one set of restrictions and still hold that another restriction of a similar kind goes too far? In our study today we have seen how God feels about such efforts to restrict His people in their efforts to worship Him freely. The question remains - are your feelings in harmony with those of God, or not?

### **APPEAL**

Not long ago, Pastor James Coates was arrested in Canada for holding a church service. His great sin? He did not follow the restrictions imposed by government regarding face masks and he did not follow the arbitrary limits on how many could worship. His wife, Erin Coates, is now speaking out against the injustices of her native Canada. "This is definitely not the nation that I grew up in," she told Tucker Carlson of Fox News Thursday evening. "For a while, I think our freedoms have just been slowly stripped from us, and so slowly over time that we didn't even realize it." "We are on a dangerous road right now," she said. "And I think because we've just been in the pot for so long, boiling, that people aren't really realizing the danger that we're facing as a nation."

Here's how another writer put it just over a century ago: As the storm approaches, a large class who have professed faith in the third angel's message, but have not been sanctified through obedience to the truth, abandon their position and join the ranks of the opposition. By uniting with the world and partaking of its spirit, they have come to view matters in nearly the same light; and when the test is brought, they are prepared to choose the easy, popular side. GC 608.1-GC 608.2

Friend, where do you intend to stand on this matter? At the end, there will be two options only. We can recognize and submit to the authority of God and His Word, or we can submit to the enactments of men. When brought to the final test, may God help us to say, with the noble Peter, "We must obey God, rather than men."