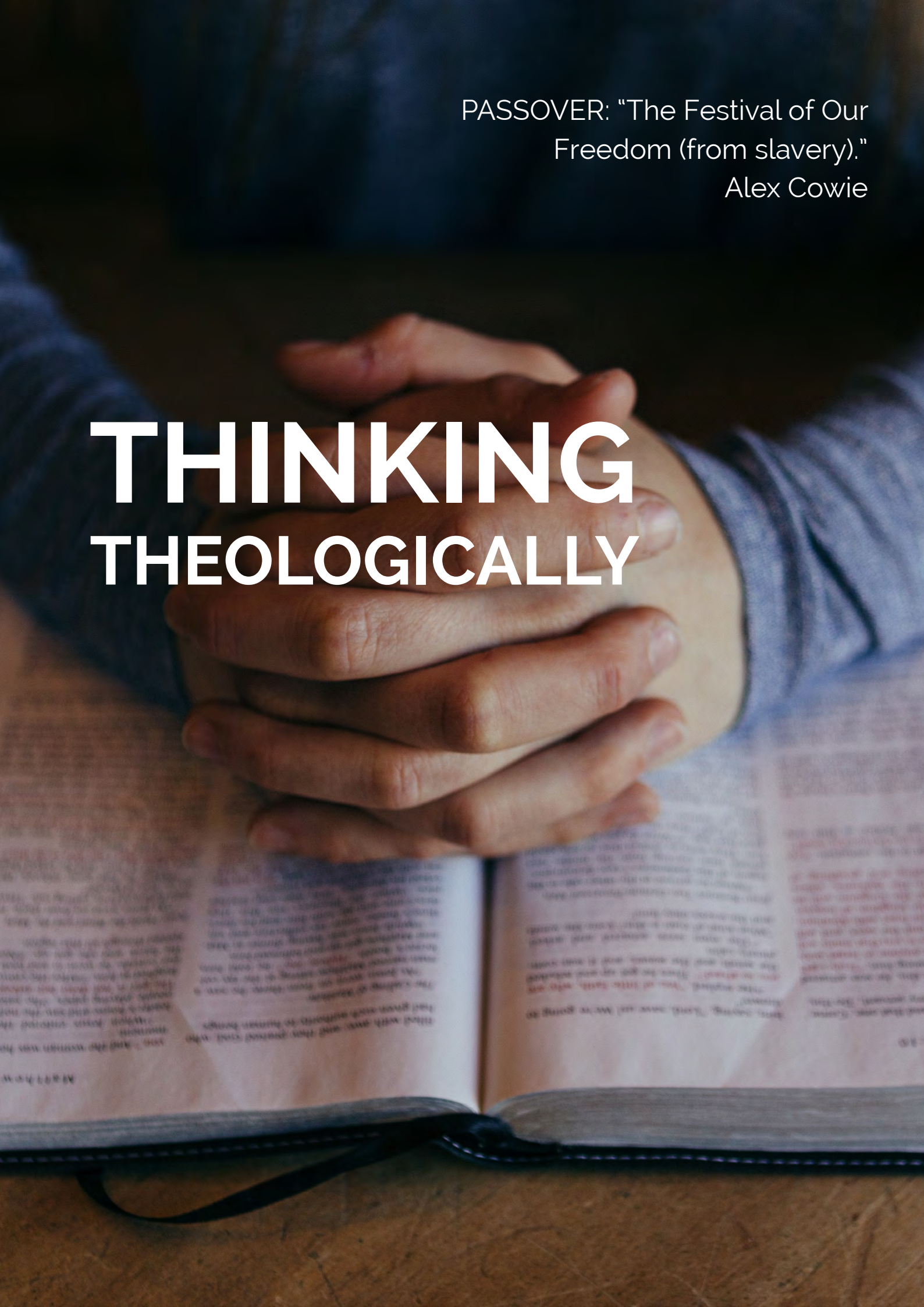


PASSOVER: "The Festival of Our
Freedom (from slavery)."

Alex Cowie

THINKING THEOLOGICALLY



Back in the sixties a singer with a philosophical turn of mind had a line in one of his songs, which went, "Freedom is a word I seldom use without thinking." The harsh reality of life under the sun is that from the earliest days of human history some people have been subjected to enslavement by others. Usually, though not exclusively, the rich and powerful made the weak and poor their slaves. Slaves were treated well by some masters but by some they were treated harshly, even cruelly.

There are of course many ways in which people can be slaves, not simply as slaves of others but slaves to their own appetites and weaknesses. In modern times the availability and relatively low cost of addictive liquids and substances have been a snare to so many and they have become both entrapped by and slaves to their addictions.

Sadly there are tens of thousands hooked on the so called designer or recreational drugs as well as seriously damaging drugs such as Heroin. Often such people end up slaves to those who supply what they need as well as the substance or liquid.

Alcohol addiction in the UK in the 21st century is high epidemic with too many young people suffering from chronic liver disease. It is easy to see why we sometimes hear that someone, he or she, is addicted to alcohol which simply means a slave to it.

Moving to another reflection regarding slavery, in 2007 the Royal Mint produced coins to mark the Bicentenary of the Abolition of Slavery within the dominions of the British Empire. The Act was passed in 1888. This was, in its day, viewed as a great achievement and to an extent it was. Unfortunately the Act did not end the huge and extensive problem of slavery in the UK and across the world, then nor in the contemporary situation. Indeed we know that there is more trafficking of people into slavery, both children and adults in the 21st century than was the case in the 19th Century. The figures are alarmingly high reckoned in millions rather than hundreds of thousands as in the 19th century.

The Festival of Passover as it was first instituted has practical relevance for the modern world as to deliverance from 'slavery.'

Biblical History:

In the millennia covered by the Bible slavery was common among the peoples of ancient civilisations. Later in Israel regulations were laid down to safeguard slaves from injustice and cruelty. That doesn't mean of course that it was easy for the slaves. In general slaves were all too frequently were abused. They were made to do dangerous work, go to war row as galley slaves chained to their oar and even impossible tasks, like making bricks without straw.

It is both interesting and encouraging that in the New Testament period many slaves were converted to Messiah through the preaching of the gospel of about the Christ who came to set people free from slavery to sin, death

and hell. There were some slaves even found in the palaces of both Herod and Caesar. God in Christ did and still can set people free from spiritual slavery though they may have to be, where they are in this world literally slaves. We should note here too He can also set people free from their addictions too.

We now turn to The Patriarchal Period in Bible history:

Abrahamic Period: You may remember that in the life of Abraham (in approx 2008BC) God Almighty (El-Shaddai) met with and spoke to his servant. Among other things the Lord told him that his offspring would go down to Egypt and become slaves to the Egyptians for a period of 400 years, see Gen. 15:13a. So in keeping with that promise God took Joseph, the beloved son of his father, Jacob, to Egypt as a slave only to exalt him in due to time to the highest role in the land, with no one above him but Pharaoh. In that position Joseph was able to prepare for the seven years of famine during a God given seven years of abundant harvests. Then by means God led the aged Jacob and 70 male offspring together with the women and children down to Egypt. There Joseph's long lost family they were given fertile Goshen. Later when the Israelites became too numerous, the Pharaoh, ordered the killing of male babies for fear and so the for Israelite slaves their lot became bitter bondage.

However, in keeping with the same promise the Lord decreed that He would bring His nation people out of slavery. See Genesis 15:14 with reference to the Israelites He says, "But I will punish the nation they serve as slaves, and afterwards they will come out with great possessions."

Now let us look briefly at something from The Mosaic Period: This was the period of the fulfilment of the promise made to Abraham. Consider here the weeks prior to the Exodus under the leadership of Moses. Those who are familiar with Scripture may know that God underscored his intention to liberate Israel from slavery, with four "I wills" found in Exodus 6:6 & 7 where we see that these words are all about the Sovereign grace and power of God which was to be exercised in the work of effecting 1. Remove 2. Release (bring you out) 3. Redemption and 4. Relationship. "I will bring you out - I will set you free you from being slaves----- I will redeem you ----- I will take you as my people." This is why in later times i.e. Second Temple times the Jewish Rabbis placed an "I will" on each of the four cups used in the Seder or order at the Passover meal.

The first Passover was the Great Festival of Freedom:

We are familiar with the fact that on that first occasion of the feast three items were essential to celebrating it: The lamb, the unleavened bread and the bitter herbs. But central to the feast was the lamb, which is so important as to be called "the Passover," in Exodus 12:2.

The Passover Lamb was the Means or Ground of Ensuring their Freedom or we could say their Release from slavery, because by the offering of the lamb, in the God's prescribed way, the families who sheltered under its

blood and who participated by faith in eating the lamb, roasted with fire, were: 1. Redeemed from death, 2. Delivered from the dominion of Egypt and 3. Set Free from Egypt's slavery.

Observe here that: Egypt Represents a System Antagonistic to the Living and True God:

It ought not to be overlooked that Egypt was, in its whole character and systems, anti-God. It was a world governed by the law of sin and death and spiritual ignorance. This is why Bible interpreters have seen in the historical record of Israel in Egypt and the Exodus from it, the abiding spiritual principles which refer to people being delivered from the spiritual bondage of sin and death. This deliverance was achieved by the work of Messiah. The symbolism speaks of the story of Redemption God's way, by His Lamb, and the subsequent release from enslavement to the law of sin and death and spiritual ignorance. This message was further developed under the shadows and types of the ritual system. But one very important point in it all was that, "what the law could not do," to effect salvation/redemption, God promised to do and did in the Person of His Son the Messiah. He condemned sin in the 'flesh,' of His Son. Rom 8: 2-3. The ref is of course to one aspect of Jesus' death on the cross. It is most important to be aware that the virtue and effective benefits of that death applied to those who died long before it all happened, but who believed the promise about Him.

"The Spirit of Egypt" was in many Israelites:

When we look carefully at the point of the Exodus we have to say that sadly "not all Israelites were true Israel." Not all who came out of Egypt gave evidence of true faith and spiritual life but rather of idolatry and rebellion. Some of the Psalms refer to this as hardening their hearts in the rebellion in the desert. Psalms 81:12 so too the solemn warning of Ps. 95:7b - 11. With reference to this The New Testament uses the word apostasy (AV) or "falling away" or 'departing,' to describe this rebellion. The result of this attitude of heart and manner of life was early seen among the people in the astonishing fact that Passover was not celebrated during the 40 years of wilderness wandering. Bear in mind here that not long after the first Passover and Exodus Israel received the Law both in the Ten Words and the spiritual and practical principles. The problems of apostasy soon became apparent in that: 1. Many preferred the worldly religion of Egypt and 2. Others turned the, "This do and you shall live" of the law into a system of do's and don'ts designed to obtain a religious righteousness by law keeping and so by this means they foolishly believed they could win God's favour.

When we look at the history of Israel on the one hand it is really sad to record that it has been one of apostasy, and of rebellion, but mercifully on the other hand of return. They turned away in rebellion, then God

gave them up to their own ways, but then later there was return when He turned their hearts back to Him. The practical consequence of their apostasy was that the Festival of their freedom was denied to them again and again. Yet it was their own doing. They denied themselves the blessings of this covenant means of grace because they preferred, in their wilful and wanton ignorance, bondage/ enslavement to the law of sin and death. This is the way it was and let us remind ourselves is universally too. We will look at this next.

In the previous piece the law of sin and death was mentioned a few times, but how extensive was it, what exactly is it and when did it function?

1. It Affects All the Children of Adam: (Excluding the Son of God)

The Biblical account of man's fall into sin and separation from God, (which included physical and spiritual death) is no fable but fact – historical events. Gen. 6: 5. Has a profound insight for us on this, "Then the Lord saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intention of the thoughts of his heart was evil continually. And the Lord was sorry that He had made man on the earth ---." See too Rom. 5: 12 "Therefore just as through one man sin entered the world, and death through sin, and thus death spread to all men, because all sinned --."

Consider: 1. The Law of Sin and Death is Universal in its extent. "All have sinned and come short of the glory of God." "There is no one righteous, no not one."

This law means that man's whole nature is not basically good but corrupted and bound over to the propensities of his fallen/sinful nature, by which he goes against what God put in his heart as man. By this we mean God's moral code. Cf. Romans 2: 14, Paul says to the Jews, "For when the Gentiles, who do not have the (written law) do by nature things contained in the law, these not having the law, show the work of the law written in their hearts." The principle enunciated here takes us right back to the situation immediately following the entry of sin into the world. Remember that when our first parents sinned and fell etc, they brought all mankind not only into an estate of sin and misery, but of rebellion against the Lord God, the great King of the Universe. This state of man is enslavement to sin.

2. It Affects Israel (the Jewish People) More So:

Why do we say this law of sin & death affects "Israel more so? The answer is simply, "that to whom, much has been given of the same much will be required." Paul sheds light on this point Speaking of Israel, "Theirs is the adoption as children; theirs the Divine glory, the covenants, theirs the receiving of the law, the temple worship and the promises (in Messiah is to be understood here). Theirs the patriarchs, from whom is traced the human ancestry of Messiah, who is God over all, forever praised! Amen."

Romans 9:4 &5. Now it does not matter whether many in Israel i.e. Jewish people claim to be Atheists or agnostics or something else, the principle stands, right down to the present time.

You see the sorry situation from which Israel was released and redeemed at the Exodus from Egypt was one in which many continued to be ruled by the law of sin and death rather than the law of promise in Messiah. Consider how, at the foot of Mt Sinai, they quickly returned to the familiar idolatry of the Egyptians. We previously referred to this. Now the picture we've painted though real and true may easily lead us think all was/is lost. But we would be wrong to think thus.

Consider the very important other side of things namely The Law of the Spirit of Life in Messiah:

What needs to be clear to us is that, 'the law of the Spirit of Life in Messiah Jesus' was operating in Israel even in those days of the Exodus through to the end of the Prophetic period with Malachi and beyond. It was after all the Spirit of the Lord, (Ruach Adonai) who enabled true believers to live and love the law from the heart from the beginning and from the Exodus onwards. The others who did not embrace the word of promise in Messiah by faith recklessly rebelled. And why was this because they lived by the law of sin and death? Consider here what Isaiah says in 63:10 of Israel in the days of Moses, "But they rebelled and grieved His Holy Spirit," and later in v14 it was the Sovereign work of "the Spirit of the Lord that gave them rest." That is rest unto their souls and thus in the God of Abraham.

Observe here that real Redemption and Freedom came to Israelites who received the word of promise in Messiah, who was their Passover, and these believers were enabled by the Spirit of Life, the Holy Spirit to live by the principles of the law with a love for them from the heart as we've already stated.

Contemporary Relevance:

To us all then, as we think about the real significance of the Festival of our Freedom, we need to see this in the following terms: the literal release was granted to all the Israelites who came out of Egypt but the spiritual emancipation was granted to all, who through faith in the Messiah who was promised to Abraham saw more in the sacramental symbolism than the unbelieving. But we at our standpoint, Post Incarnation, see the reality accomplished by God's Messiah in the flesh, on the cross which He made His altar and offered Himself upon. In the context of His death, in relation to the Festival of Passover, we can rightly think of Him as our Passover sacrificed for us. So it is we that have in Him, by faith, true freedom from the law of sin and death.

Thinking like this helps us to understand and apply the apostolic injunction, "Stand fast in the freedom with which Messiah has set you free.

For it is for freedom He has set us free. Therefore do not let yourselves be burdened again with a yoke of slavery. The yoke referred to here in Galatians 5:1 is the spiritual and moral principles that generate and motivate people in the wrong way, the sin slave way; the way of the law of sin and death. This in turn sets people a course that will ruin them eternally.

Reader be sure of it (as another likes to say) Christ the true, effective and all sufficient Passover lamb has the power, not only to deal with the eternal consequences of our sins and to forgive our sins but to deliver us from whatever we are enslaved by. Listen to Him, "Whosoever commits sin is a slave to sin," "If therefore the Son (of God) shall make you free, free you will be!" John 8: 34b and 36.

Let us seek grace to live by the law of the Spirit who gives life in Messiah Jesus and let us not be content to live by the law of sin and death – slaves to sinful appetites and addictions.

Let us be clear that the Festivals Jewish or Christian or any religious duties in themselves have no efficacy (effective power to help us) no more than has the perfect law of God, wrongly used, to set us free. These things will keep us enslaved and as we've seen ruin us and cut us off from God the Saviour. Friend may you know what it is to live by faith in the Lamb of God be set free by the Spirit of Life in Messiah Jesus, so that you will be truly set free to love and live by the law of God as free people not as slaves.

The Festival of Pesach should therefore focus the mind of believing Jews and Gentiles on Messiah, who is the only source of strength for us whereby we can live the perfect law of freedom by the Spirit of Life.