“No one shall be held in slavery or servitude; slavery and the slave trade shall be prohibited in all their forms.”

Article 4, Universal Declaration of Human Rights

On December 10, 1948, the General Assembly of the United Nations adopted and proclaimed the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. This document can be seen as consensus of world opinion after World War II, and although slavery persists in various forms, it is officially prohibited in most nations today.

What is slavery? How has it been practiced in different times and places? In particular, how did it develop in the Americas, and in the United States? How and why was it abolished? What is its legacy? Are the chains of slavery still rattling in our modern world?
Introduction to Slavery

- Slavery defined
- Slavery and race
- Major reasons for slavery
- Origin of the term
What Is Slavery?

It is difficult to draw a hard line between slavery and free labor. There are labor practices that, while not technically slavery, are so exploitative and so restrictive that they come very close to it. Slavery can best be described as follows:

Under slavery, one person can belong to another as their property, just as a cow, a house, or a wallet full of money can belong to someone. The owner can use the slave in any way, and can sell the slave at any time. Under a system of slavery, compulsory labor or sex is enforced by private or government authority.

A slave may be bought and sold in the market like an ox. He is liable to be sold off to a distant land from his family. He is bound in chains hand and foot; and his sufferings are aggravated a hundred fold, by the terrible thought, that he is not allowed to struggle against misfortune, corporal punishment, insults and outrages committed upon himself and family; and he is not allowed to help himself, to resist or escape the blow, which he sees impending over him. I was a slave, a prisoner for life; I could possess nothing, nor acquire anything but what must belong to my keeper. No one can imagine my feelings in my reflecting moments, but he who has himself been a slave.

Henry Bibb, *The Life and Adventures of an American Slave* (1849)
In the United States, the concepts of slavery and race are inseparable. However, in ancient Rome and Greece, among the Persians and the Chinese, and in Africa and the Americas, people became slaves for three major reasons that were not race-based:

1. Prisoners captured by armies during war were forced into slavery
2. Poverty forced people to sell themselves or their children into slavery or face starvation
3. Punishment
1. In war, captives could be enslaved and were often the most significant share of the winner’s booty. The massive slavery in ancient Greece and Rome was supported by war, and even if acquisition of slaves was not the reason for the war, it was a “happy” result of a successful military campaign.

2. In times of hardship, poor people could sell themselves or their children into slavery to avoid starvation. Although they gave up control of their lives, they knew they would live.

3. In many ancient societies, slavery was a form of punishment for criminals, meaning that a person could be made a slave for his crimes.
The word “slave” comes from “Slav,” the name of a group of people in Eastern Europe who for a while were the major source of ancient Roman slaves.
Ancient Slavery

- Egypt
- Greece
- Rome
- Americas
- Africa
There are some records of slavery in ancient Egypt; however, obligatory work by peasants that had to be done at certain times and under certain conditions was probably more than outright slavery.

The massive building projects, such as the great pyramids, do not seem to have been built with slave labor, but rather with free labor, perhaps working under some form of conscription when the growing season was past and workers were available for state service.
Slavery was common during all periods of ancient Greek history. It has been argued that slavery actually enabled Athenian democracy, because so much of the necessary work was done by slaves; free men could devote themselves to politics.

Sparta, a society based on permanent full-time military service, was supported by enslaving neighboring people.
Slavery in Ancient Rome

Pompeii slave market
Slavery in Rome was as widespread as in Greece.

Many slaves were captured in battle, which served as a deterrent to rebellion because if you were captured you were either enslaved or executed. A captured soldier was considered already dead, with no rights, to be used or abused at his owner’s pleasure.

Others became slaves for economic reasons, selling themselves or their children as an alternative to starvation.

In Rome’s “Golden Age,” from about 50 B.C.E. to 198 C.E., about a third of the population of Rome was slave.
Again, there is no evidence that anyone in Rome thought slavery was wrong or unnatural. Although slave revolts sometimes threatened the order and prosperity of Rome, slaves rebelled to obtain power and property for themselves, not in opposition to slavery itself, which seemed natural.

Death of Spartacus
by H. Vogel

Spartacus was a gladiator who led an unsuccessful slave revolt in 73 B.C.E.
The lack of a written record, and the deliberate effort by Spanish conquistadors to obliterate as much as they could of the civilizations they were replacing, leaves us with little direct knowledge of life in pre-Columbian societies.

Evidence shows that the Incas of Peru did not practice slavery, although there was almost certainly a system of obligatory service to the state that enabled massive building projects.

Among the Aztecs of Mexico, slavery was widespread, although slave status was probably not permanent or hereditary.

Anecdotes from the early conquest period of Spaniards who were captured and enslaved by natives in the Yucatan and what is now the U.S. Gulf Coast region indicate that slavery was widely practiced in pre-conquest America.