

Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

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In the world - not of it: Restraining Freedom

Freedom is a key theme of the Bible and is often contrasted with slavery. In the book of Exodus the Children of Israel were held in bondage in Egypt. Moses was chosen by God to become their saviour and led them out of slavery to the borders of the Promised Land. Centuries later the nation of Israel was taken into captivity. First the Northern Kingdom was taken captive into Assyria and later Judah and Benjamin were taken captive into Babylon. After seventy years God moved the heart of the Persian king Cyrus to release the Jews to return to Jerusalem and rebuild the temple of God.

The Bible also gives us more personal stories. Joseph was born free. He was the favourite son of Jacob but was sold into slavery by his jealous brothers. Yet God delivered him from his imprisonment and he became the saviour of the Egyptian nation and his own family. In 2 Kings 5 a little maid taken was captive into Syria by Naaman the great Syrian general. But Naaman, a man who seemed to have everything, finds himself enslaved by leprosy. It is the little maid who directs him to Elisha and a miraculous cure. Daniel, the young Jewish nobleman, finds himself captive in Babylon and begins one of the most remarkable journeys of faith during the reigns of the great Babylonian and Persian kings. These outstanding examples of faith displayed a spiritual freedom which the most difficult circumstances could not subdue.

In the New Testament, we are introduced to Jesus. He is immediately presented to us as the One who saves. "And she will bring forth a Son, and you shall call His name JESUS, for He will save His people from their sins" (Matthew 1:21). "The next day John saw Jesus coming toward him, and said, 'Behold! The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!'" (John 1:29).

The subsequent ministry of Jesus involved His fulfilling the passage He read from Isaiah in the synagogue at Nazareth in Luke 4, "So He came to Nazareth, where He had been brought up. And as His custom was, He went into the synagogue on the Sabbath day, and stood up to read. And He was handed the book of the prophet Isaiah. And when He had opened the book, He found the place where it was written: 'The Spirit of the LORD is upon Me, because He has anointed Me to preach the gospel to the poor. He has sent Me to heal the broken-hearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the acceptable year of the LORD.'" (verses 16-19).

Freedom was at the heart of Christ's ministry. In Mark 4 and 5 it is seen in those Jesus had set free from disaster (the disciples delivered from the storm), the devil (Legion delivered from the demons), disease (the woman delivered from years of sickness) and even death (Jairus' daughter raised from the dead). Peter describes Jesus in Acts 10:38, "God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power, who went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with Him" (Acts 10:38).

Whether people were miraculously healed or simply came to trust in Jesus they experienced the same freedom. The woman in Luke 7:47 entered into this liberty when Jesus said, "Therefore I say to you, her sins, which are many, are forgiven, for she loved much. But to whom little is forgiven, the same loves little." In John's Gospel, Jesus links this spiritual liberty to knowing Him. "Therefore if the Son makes you free, you shall be free indeed" (John 8:36). Jesus is the Person who gives true liberty to those who trust in Him. It is this liberty God wants us to enjoy.

But in order for it to be possible for salvation to be extended to everyone, Christ had to give Himself. He became the Saviour by giving His own life. The One who was completely free became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross. We do not often think too deeply about it but Christ died a prisoner. Jesus was the one who sacrificed His own liberty on our account. We must never forget Christ subjected Himself to suffering and gave His life for us. It was not taken from Him (see John 10). Christ became a prisoner to set us free; He died so that we could live.

Christ's resurrection bears testimony to His victory over death and the power and liberty of His glorious life. "O Death, where is your sting? O Hades, where is your victory?" (1 Corinthians 15:55). By faith in Christ we now enter into the glorious liberty of the children of God. This includes being free from the penalty of our sins, having the resources to overcome the power of sin now and ultimately being delivered from the presence of sin. We should never lose the sense of God's forgiveness. George Whitfield, the great Puritan preacher, was converted in Oxford. He trusted Christ

on his knees in a field. He wrote that whenever he returned to Oxford he would run to same place to kneel down and thank God for his salvation! When did you last kneel down and thank God for your salvation? You can do it this morning! Christ has also secured for us an eternal home in which we will fully experience the liberty He wants us to enjoy spiritually now. Paul looked forward to this when He wrote, "to ... be with Christ, which is far better" (Philippians 1:23).

We are now in that period between our salvation and day we enter glory. How are we to live in this intervening period? What kind of journey are we taking from salvation to glory?

There were once two young men who saved up to emigrate to America. They just had enough money to buy the cheapest tickets. They had enough food for the journey and on the night before they landed in New York they decided to celebrate their arrival with a meal in the ship's restaurant. At the entrance to the restaurant, they asked the steward how much the meal would cost. "Nothing," replied the steward. "It's included in your ticket." They had travelled thousands of miles on the journey of their lives and not taken advantage of what was rightly theirs! When I first heard that story, which I have told many times since, it was used to remind me of the many Christians who take the journey to heaven in poverty rather than accessing through faith the resources of heaven. God does not want simply to save us but He wants us to enjoy the liberty and power of being the children of God.

This liberty includes direct access into the presence of God. "Let us therefore come boldly to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need" (Hebrews 4:16). "Draw near to God and He will draw near to you" (James 4:8).

This liberty includes living by the word of God. "Then Jesus said to those Jews who believed Him, 'If you abide in My word, you are My disciples indeed. And you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free'" (John 8:31-32). The word of God is described as the perfect law of liberty. "But he who looks into the perfect law of liberty and continues in it, and is not a forgetful hearer but a doer of the work, this one will be blessed in what he does" (James 1:25).

This liberty includes experiencing the Spirit of God who bears witness to our deliverance and to the fact that we are now the children of God, "For as many as are led by the Spirit of God, these are sons of God. For you did not receive the spirit of bondage again to fear, but you received the Spirit of adoption by whom we cry out, 'Abba, Father.' The Spirit Himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God" (Romans 8:14-16).

Paul prayed, "For this reason I bow my knees to the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, from whom the whole family in heaven and earth is named, that He would grant you, according to the riches of His glory, to be strengthened with might through His Spirit in the inner man, that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith; that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may be able to comprehend with all the saints what is the width and length and depth and height - to know the love of Christ which passes knowledge; that you may be filled with all the fullness of God" (Ephesians 3:14-19).

This liberty includes the fellowship of God's people. "And they continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers" (Acts 2:42).

This liberty also includes being set free from the power of sin. In Romans 7 Paul describes the he struggle had in coming to terms with his old life and its appetites and in trying do God's will. In anguish he cries, "O wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?" He sees no good in himself but then immediately responds, "I thank God - through Jesus Christ our Lord!" (Romans 7:24-25). He came, by faith to understand that his old self, what is also referred to as the "flesh" was judged in Christ on the cross. Christ did not only deal with our sins but with sin in its entirety. Christ was raised from the dead and the Christian has new life in the resurrected Christ. Baptism demonstrates this. "What shall we say then? Shall we continue in sin that grace may abound? Certainly not! How shall we who died to sin live any longer in it? Or do you not know that as many of us as were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into His death? Therefore we were buried with Him through baptism into death, that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life" (Romans 6:1-4).

The Christian is not bound by his old life and passions but has new life. He is by faith dead to the principle of sin and death, but freed by the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus. "For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has made me free from the law of sin and death. For what the law could not do in that it was weak through the flesh, God did by sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, on account of sin: He condemned sin in the flesh, that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us who do not walk according to the flesh but according to the Spirit. For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit, the things of the Spirit. For to be carnally minded is death, but to be spiritually minded is life and peace." (Romans 8:2-6)

On earth the law of gravity holds us down, so to speak. But the tiniest bird has another power at its disposal - the power of flight. God has given the Christian the power of life in Christ Jesus. He wants us to live in the good of that life and not to be enslaved by time, circumstances or materialism but to enjoy the liberty of being God's children and living by faith.

But there is another aspect to this liberty which the life of Christ helps us to understand. No one was as free as Jesus. He was not confined by time or space. He could walk on water, still storms, walk through natural barriers, heal incurable diseases, and raise the dead. All the things which limit and confine us were created by Him. Yet He, who was liberty, confined Himself.

Nanotechnology is the science and technology of building electronic circuits and devices from single atoms and molecules. It is heralded as the new and exciting breakthrough in science. Jesus became tiny to show the largeness of God's heart. He used His power to become small. In 2 Kings 4, Elisha raises the son of the Shunamite woman. Starting at verse 32 we read, "When Elisha came into the house, there was the child, lying dead on his bed. He went in therefore, shut the door behind the two of them, and prayed to the LORD. And he went up and lay on the child, and put his mouth on his mouth, his eyes on his eyes, and his hands on his hands; and he stretched himself out on the child, and the flesh of the child became warm. He returned and walked back and forth in the house, and again went up and stretched himself out on him; then the child sneezed seven times, and the child opened his eyes".

Elisha stretches himself to become small - the size of a child. This is what Jesus did. He used all His power to confine Himself within a human body. Through His life on earth, not only did He perform the supernatural, but also He submitted Himself to God's will and to an obedience that led to the cross.

This principle of service is demonstrated by the Lord in the night He was betrayed as the disciples argued about who would be the greatest. He quietly got up, took a towel, a basin of water and washed His disciples feet. It was the work of a household servant. John writes, "So when He had washed their feet, taken His garments, and sat down again, He said to them, 'Do you know what I have done to you? You call Me Teacher and Lord, and you say well, for so I am. If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have given you an example, that you should do as I have done to you. Most assuredly, I say to you, a servant is not greater than his master; nor is he who is sent greater than he who sent him. If you know these things, blessed are you if you do them'" (John 13:12-17).

Those who truly know the heart of God, and have come to understand the depth of His love and blessing, know how to truly serve. Our liberty as the children of God gives us the dignity to display God's love through our service and sacrifice.

The human tendency is to take pride in position and status. Jesus makes this very point in Mark's Gospel, "Jesus called them to Himself and said to them, 'You know that those who are considered rulers over the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. Yet it shall not be so among you; but whoever desires to become great among you shall be your servant. And whoever of you desires to be first shall be slave of all. For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many'" (Mark 10:42-45). This aspect of Christianity is too often overlooked. We can be seduced by gift, responsibility and reputation and forget the simplicity of Christ's ministry and its power expressed in the fruit of the Spirit, "But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control. Against such there is no law. And those who are Christ's have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. If we live in the Spirit, let us also walk in the Spirit. Let us not become conceited, provoking one another, envying one another" (Galatians 5:22-26).

It is interesting that when writing to Christian slaves Paul encourages them to show their liberty in Christ through their slavery. They were to dignify the simplest and menial task by doing it "as unto the Lord". He also writes that if they were set free they should demonstrate their liberty in service for Christ. "Were you called while a slave? Do not be concerned about it; but if you can be made free, rather use it. For he who is called in the Lord while a slave is the Lord's freedman. Likewise he who is called while free is Christ's slave" (1 Corinthians 7:21-22).

Augustine wrote, "Man is most free when controlled by God alone." Our liberty in Christ brings us into a place where we can truly serve. Paul asserts his freedom as a child of God and demonstrates it in service to others. "For though I am free from all men, I have made myself a servant to all, that I might win the more" (1 Corinthians 9:19).

But we are not to lose the liberty we have in Christ by returning to a self-righteousness based on keeping the law. This was the problem the Galatians had because of teachers who were trying to get them to fulfil the Mosaic law. Paul writes, "Stand fast therefore in the liberty by which Christ has made us free, and do not be entangled again with a yoke of bondage" (Galatians 5:1). So many people still think that the way to heaven is by good works. If that were

possible why did God sacrifice His Son? The law only proved man's inability do God's will and his need of salvation. Jesus became the Saviour and the Bible teaches that the way to God is through Christ, "Jesus said to him, 'I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me'" (John 14:6).

Neither are we to use our liberty in Christ as an excuse to do what we like. We are to be subject to the mind and will of God expressed in the Scriptures. It is dishonouring to Christ when His people entertain behaviour which is any but Christian. Peter guards us against such a pathway, "as free, yet not using liberty as a cloak for vice, but as bondservants of God" (1 Peter 2:16). Our liberty is described as a glorious liberty: "the glorious liberty of the children of God" (Romans 8:21). In matters of faith and fellowship we are not parade our personal liberty to the confusion or discouragement of fellow believers. "But beware lest somehow this liberty of yours become a stumbling block to those who are weak", (1 Corinthians 8:9). In matters of conscience we should not be overbearing in our convictions or insensitive to the personal convictions of other believers. We need to show understanding and, sometimes in consideration for others, be prepared to forego our own liberty. For example, some Christians have strong convictions about avoiding alcohol. Often these convictions arise out of bitter past personal experiences. Those who feel freer in this regard should be sensitive to such convictions. Sometimes Christians are all too ready to attack each other over personal matters of conscience rather than display a Christlike spirit of understanding and respect. One of the reasons God does not legislate for every aspect of our lives is that it exercises both our faith and our understanding of one another. It provides opportunities to show that we are Christ's disciples through the love we have for one another. But equally those with strong personal convictions should not take the moral high ground in regard those who have not come to similar conclusions, "For why is my liberty judged by another man's conscience?" Paul asks in 1 Corinthians 10:29. "For you, brethren, have been called to liberty; only do not use liberty as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another" (Galatians 5:13).

The word "liberty" in Galatians 5:13 was used in regard to the freeing of Greek slaves. A legal transaction took place whereby the slave was purchased by a Greek god. As the slave could not pay for his freedom, his master paid it into the temple treasury in the presence of the slave. A legal document was drawn up containing the words "for freedom." The freed slave could never be enslaved again and became the property of the god! "And having been set free from sin, you became slaves of righteousness" (Romans 6:18). "For you were bought at a price; therefore glorify God in your body and in your spirit, which are God's" (1 Corinthians 6:20).

The story is told of a majestic eagle with fine feathers and enormous wings which had been kept at a zoo for many years. One day the aviary was left open and the great bird got out. But because of its years of captivity it had forgotten how fly. It could no longer soar up into the heavens but was quickly caught and returned to its cage.

"But those who wait on the LORD shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint" (Isaiah 40:31).

God intended us to fly by faith and to fly beautifully!

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