

Proper Freedom in Christ

*“The creature itself
also shall be
delivered from the
bondage of
corruption into the
glorious liberty of
the children
of God.”*

—*Romans 8:21*

IN HIS LETTER TO THE church at Rome, the Apostle Paul confirms that the faithful followers of our Lord Jesus have been delivered from the “bondage of corruption” and are now set free as the “children of God.” This

continues to be a special blessing to Christians who are striving to live after the pattern set forth by their Master, Christ Jesus. The apostle goes on to point out, however, that the world in general is still in bondage to sin and its results. “We know that all the rest of creation has been groaning with pains of childbirth up to the present time.”—vs. 22, *International Standard Version*

CONDITIONS APPLY

From the Scriptures, we learn about liberty and those who enjoy its freedom. God’s Word also speaks about its contrasting principle of bondage, and those who are held in its grasp. Nevertheless,

what many do not realize is that the resulting actions of liberty are not always desirable, nor are they always pleasing to the Lord. Personal liberty cannot be expected without certain conditions or considerations being applied, neither can it have its proper effect when it is not in accord with the Scriptures.

For example, we know that Earth's first parents—Adam and Eve—were permitted to exercise their liberty, but because they failed to obey God's righteous laws that had promised them life, they were condemned and sentenced to death. (Gen. 2:16,17; 3:17-19) Later, while God's chosen people Israel were held as slaves in Egypt, they longed for liberty and to be set free from bondage. In God's due time, we know that he did set them free. However, their freedom did not imply that they had a right to do whatever they pleased, and they were soon brought under the restraints and conditions of the Law Covenant. (Exod. 19:3-8) This proved to be a burden to them because of their inherited sin, which God's law condemned.—Rom. 3:19,20

A JUST LAW

The apostle explains that the Law which was established upon righteousness proved to be a yoke upon the necks of the Jews. "The law is holy, and the commandment holy, and just, and good. Was then that which is good made death unto me? God forbid. But sin, that it might appear sin, working death in me by that which is good; that sin by the commandment might become exceeding sinful. For we know that the law is spiritual: but I am carnal, sold under sin."—Rom. 7:12-14

God's law was spiritual because it came from him. It was of divine origin and was perfect, just, and righteous in every way. Paul asked, "Is the law sin?" His reply: "God forbid." Had the Israelites been able to measure up to the Law's standards, they would have enjoyed the promised rights and liberty resulting from their obedience to it. They, however, like Adam and all his posterity, were "sold under sin," and unable to keep God's perfect law.

SERVANTS OF CORRUPTION

The Apostle Peter speaks of some who attempt to distort the doctrine of liberty. "When they speak great swelling words of vanity, they allure through the lusts of the flesh, through much wantonness, those that were clean escaped from them who live in error. While they promise them liberty, they themselves are the servants of corruption: for of whom a man is overcome, of the same is he brought in bondage."—II Pet. 2:18,19

Peter is here pointing out that there is a liberty that is displeasing to God. It is a liberty that appeals to the lusts and desires of the flesh. Those who preach in this manner appeal along the lines of the fallen flesh, and suggest in subtle ways that it is not necessary to be bound by the restraining law of God. The apostle warns about such corruptible teachings.

ALL HAVE GONE ASTRAY

It was necessary for Jesus to die in order that man might be redeemed from death, and that the human family might enjoy liberty under the perfect laws of God. The Prophet Isaiah addressed this when he wrote: "He [Jesus] was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities:

the chastisement of our peace was upon him; and with his stripes we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way; and the LORD hath laid on him the iniquity of us all.”—Isa. 53:5,6

The prophet speaks of the principle of full liberty to simply do as one pleases, as iniquity. However, in this connection we note that Jesus proved worthy to be man’s Redeemer because he was at all times totally obedient to his Father’s will. During the closing and terribly agonizing days of his earthly ministry, we read, “He came out, and went, as he was wont, to the mount of Olives; and his disciples also followed him. ... And he was withdrawn from them about a stone’s cast, and kneeled down, and prayed, Saying, Father, if thou be willing, remove this cup from me: nevertheless not my will, but thine, be done.” (Luke 22:39,41,42) Jesus knew that he must submit himself to the doing of his Father’s will and did not consider himself at liberty to do anything otherwise. This confirms the divine purpose for his coming to earth. “I came down from heaven, not to do mine own will, but the will of him that sent me.”—John 6:38

FREE IN CHRIST

The liberty of which the Scriptures speak is freedom from the enslaving cords of sin and death. The children of Israel were given opportunity to be free from this condemnation by keeping the terms of the old Law Covenant. They were unable to do this because of sin and inherited weaknesses of the flesh, which resulted in their being brought under the additional bondage of the Law. (Gal. 4:21-25) Within

the Early Church, some taught that believers must still remain under the Law. However, through faith in Christ they had been set free from the condemnation of the Law. Paul made this matter clear, stating: "Stand fast therefore in the liberty wherewith Christ hath made us free, and be not entangled again with the yoke of bondage."—Gal. 5:1

This scripture has been improperly used to substantiate the arguments of those who offer the followers of Christ freedom and encourage them to go their own way. They suggest that the ideal state of the Christian is one in which all are free to think, believe, and act as they please. The best defense against such deceptive suggestions is when the followers of Jesus are in tune with the divine will and are glad to give up their own preferences to do the will of God. (Rom. 12:10; Phil. 2:13) Those who are thus devoted to God enjoy true liberty and are set free from bondage.

Such freedom is not completely obtainable in this present life, for the mind of the flesh strives against the mind of the Spirit. (Gal. 5:17) This causes the spiritual mind, at times, to be hampered in carrying out the entire will of God. This limitation is referred to in our featured scripture as the "bondage of corruption." From this bondage every true Christian longs to be delivered in order to be entirely free to serve the Lord—the "glorious liberty of the children of God." It will, in due time, be enjoyed in the fullest sense by those who have humbled themselves under the mighty hand of God and who have learned to love his will, faithfully, even unto death. (I Pet. 5:6; Rev. 2:10) In their resurrection bodies, they will then have the ability to

do the will of the Heavenly Father perfectly, with no cords of imperfection to restrain them.

TRUTH SHALL MAKE YOU FREE

In the scriptural record, we read, “He that sent me is with me: the Father hath not left me alone; for I do always those things that please him. ... Then said Jesus to those Jews which believed on him, If ye continue in my word, then are ye my disciples indeed; And ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free.” (John 8:29,31,32) In the family arrangement, all must to some extent be subject one to another. Each one is free to do as he or she pleases as long as it will contribute to the best interests of all the others. However, absolute freedom without applying certain conditions would prove to be unworkable. This would also be true in any field of human experience or endeavor. How much more is it true in our service to God and his Son, Christ Jesus.

The “truth” that Jesus was talking about in the foregoing passage included freedom to do the will of the Heavenly Father. Jesus was always concerned about the spiritual welfare of those who followed him and so, on behalf of his disciples, he prayed, “Sanctify them through thy truth: thy word is truth.” (John 17:17) During Jesus’ earthly ministry, the “word of truth” was contained in the Hebrew Scriptures of the Old Testament. It was these and his expanding upon them which constituted the “truth” which would make his followers free and which would sanctify them—that is, make them holy.

Jesus recognized certain prophecies and other writings as applying to himself and the purpose of

his earthly ministry. In prophetic words, the psalmist David wrote: "Sacrifice and offering thou didst not desire; mine ears hast thou opened: burnt offering and sin offering hast thou not required. Then said I, Lo, I come: in the volume of the book it is written of me, I delight to do thy will, O my God: yea, thy law is within my heart." (Ps. 40:6-8) The Apostle Paul, recognizing the importance of these words as applicable to Jesus, quoted from David's prophecy in his letter to the Hebrew brethren.—Heb. 10:5-7

SANCTIFYING INFLUENCES

The followers of our Lord have been blessed with the New Testament Scriptures that enlarge and explain that which had been written many centuries earlier. Thus is the Truth made manifest to those who are being called to become members of Christ's "body." (I Cor. 12:12-14) The Truth not only makes us free, but it is also sanctifying. (John 17:17-19) Through the actions of day to day life, God's Word serves to ultimately accomplish the divine will. The Truth separates us from the blinding influence of error and then sets us apart to do the will of God. It liberates us from the bondage of sin, and makes us the bondservants of Jesus Christ. "Not with eyeservice, as menpleasers; but as the servants of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart; With good will doing service, as to the Lord, and not to men."—Eph. 6:6,7

The freedom which Jesus offered his followers through the Truth was not a personal liberty to chart their own course in life. Rather, he wanted them to be free from the traditions of men. "Come

unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart: and ye shall find rest unto your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.” (Matt. 11:28-30) His yoke would be easy and light to bear because they would learn to love it, having been made free from the burdens of false human theories and teachings.

LEARNING OBEDIENCE

When in harmony with the divine will, we are controlled by the Father’s laws and principles. Our obedience is voluntary, and he is dealing with us with the view of our learning to love his will, and to delight in doing it. We have freedom only within the circumscribed limits of the will of God and his Son Jesus. Our Lord Jesus understood this and did not attempt to exercise personal liberty in his service to his Father and of the Truth. As a result of Christ’s obedience, Paul wrote that God had “put all things under his [Christ’s] feet, and gave him to be the head over all things to the church, Which is his body, the fulness of him that filleth all in all.”—Eph. 1:22,23

At times, the preferences of our fallen flesh may run counter to the will of God. The standards by which the will of God can be properly determined are found in his Word. There may also be experiences associated with the will of God that we find grievous until we learn to recognize and love them. If, in any such experiences, we find ourselves attempting to circumvent the divine requirements, we have not fully learned to appreciate our privilege of being

bondservants of the Lord. We would then be guided by the reasoning of the flesh while believing that we were merely exercising our liberty in Christ Jesus.

PAUL'S WARNING

The proper exercise of love for the brethren in our association with them may present difficulties at times. Through our association with the Lord's people, close friendships may develop which are proper, unless we permit them to influence our judgment or our course of action with respect to the doing of God's will. Paul cautioned the brethren at Ephesus: "I know this, that after my departing shall grievous wolves enter in among you, not sparing the flock. Also of your own selves shall men arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away disciples after them."—Acts 20:29,30

Unfortunately, Paul's warning has been proven to be the case on many occasions during the nearly two thousand years since Pentecost. In the church at Ephesus, to whom the above words were spoken, some who began to speak perverse things may have become the special friends of others in the church. This serves as a lesson for all Christians down to our day. We want to keep in touch with our friends and brethren in Christ because we love them, and we do not want to give them up. However, it is possible to injure them, or to be ourselves injured, by a course of action that is contrary to the will of God.

The most effective way to help those who may have erred is, first, to maintain our position based on scripture; and second, by our example of faithfulness, assist others to return to the right course.

The Apostle Paul did not encourage the faithful brethren to go along with those who had erred, as if nothing had happened. If he had, it would have merely encouraged them in their wrongful course. Such behavior would also have been in defiance of the expressed will of God, and as spoken through Paul, his chosen apostle.

The Apostle John further adds these strong words: “Whosoever transgresseth, and abideth not in the doctrine of Christ, hath not God. He that abideth in the doctrine of Christ, he hath both the Father and the Son. If there come any unto you, and bring not this doctrine, receive him not into your house, neither bid him God speed: For he that biddeth him God speed is partaker of his evil deeds.”—II John 1:9-11

EXERCISING RESTRAINT

The importance of restraining our personal preferences is a matter that existed in the Early Church, an example being that of eating meat that had been offered to idols. The more developed Christians understood that the meat had not been defiled by being presented in sacrifice to an inanimate god, and they felt at liberty to eat it. No doubt it could be bought at bargain prices, and its use would be an economic advantage to those who were not offended by it. However, this was an excellent opportunity to restrain from exercising this manner of liberty.

On certain occasions, the rule of love must supersede liberty. Paul realized that if he ate meat that had been offered to idols, some who believed it was not proper to do so might be weakened by his exercise of liberty. He explains, “Through thy

knowledge shall the weak brother perish, for whom Christ died? But when ye sin so against the brethren, and wound their weak conscience, ye sin against Christ. Wherefore, if meat make my brother to offend, I will eat no flesh while the world standeth, lest I make my brother to offend.”—I Cor. 8:11-13

A MEANINGFUL LESSON

The law of God calls for sacrificing self-interests, especially on behalf of our brethren. This serves as a restraining cord that limits the exercise of our own personal liberty. It will be found to apply in many situations with which we may be confronted from time to time. Even where there is no specific command of scripture to explain the will of God in a particular circumstance, this principle shows us the proper course to take. Our words, actions, and attitude may affect our brethren, particularly the ones who may be only recently walking in the narrow way, and who are not yet well grounded in the faith. The general welfare of our brethren should include control of what we do, and what we say.

The false idea that Christian liberty allows us freedom to do anything that we want is something to be guarded against. As members of the body of Christ, we are not free to say or do those things that may stumble or injure another member. Our liberty must especially be restrained to meet the viewpoint of those who are babes in Christ. (I Pet. 2:2) Our flesh may at times rebel against such restraint, but, as we learn to love God's will, we will rejoice in the privilege of humbly setting aside our own liberties and preferences that others might be blessed.—Phil. 2:3; I Pet. 5:5

EVERY THOUGHT

Vigilance is necessary to not misuse our liberty which is in Christ. “Though we walk in the flesh, we do not war after the flesh: (For the weapons of our warfare are not carnal, but mighty through God to the pulling down of strong holds;) Casting down imaginations [Greek: reasoning], and every high thing that exalteth itself against the knowledge of God, and bringing into captivity every thought to the obedience of Christ.”—II Cor. 10:3-5

This lesson should impress upon our hearts and minds the folly of believing that as followers of Christ Jesus we are no longer subject to certain restraints and restrictions. To be truly free is to become so oriented to the will of God that its every detail is a delight to our hearts. The Apostle Paul has pointed out that, so far as the mind of the flesh is concerned, we have no liberty; for our every thought is to be brought “into captivity” to the will of God. As bondservants of Christ, we are to have no plans of our own that will in any way run counter to the will of God.

BUILDING ON FAITH

We are given further instructions concerning our development as Christians by the Apostle Peter, who wrote, “Beside this, giving all diligence, add to your faith virtue; and to virtue knowledge; And to knowledge temperance; and to temperance patience; and to patience godliness; And to godliness brotherly kindness; and to brotherly kindness charity [love].”—II Pet. 1:5-7

We are free to do good unto all men as we have opportunity, and especially unto the “household of

faith.” (Gal. 6:10) We are encouraged to let our light shine forth that others may have an opportunity to be blessed by the Truth. (Matt. 5:16) We are at liberty to study for the purpose of showing ourselves “approved unto God,” and to “earnestly contend for [Greek: struggle for] the faith which was once delivered unto the saints.” (II Tim. 2:15; Jude 1:3) We have freedom to send forth the “gospel of the kingdom” and the wonderful promises of salvation to all who may have a hearing ear.—Matt. 24:14

LIMITATIONS

We do not have the freedom to walk after the flesh, nor to speak or act in any way that may even remotely be injurious to our brethren or to others. We cannot render evil for evil, or reviling for reviling. Neither are we free to do as we please according to the preferences of our fallen flesh.—Rom. 8:1,4; Tit. 3:2; I Pet. 3:9

When we learn to love the will of our loving Heavenly Father, the only limitation or restraint that we may find burdensome would be the hampering of the imperfections of the flesh. These imperfections alone would prevent us from rendering our total and absolute obedience to our Heavenly Father and our dear Lord Jesus in response to the wonderful blessings that we have received. Because of these fleshly cords of bondage, we often groan while we strive to keep our sacrifice on the altar until it is fully consumed.—Rom. 8:23

In the resurrection, we will be delivered fully into the glorious liberty of the sons of God. At that time, we will be able to render the perfect and absolute obedience which we are striving to do at the

present time. For now, we are entering the closing days of 2024 and anticipating the beginning of a new year in Christ. May the wonderful hope that we have set before us spur us on each day of the incoming year to greater faithfulness, love, and zeal as servants of our dear Lord and Master. ■