

Freedom in Christ

“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 8:31,32

ACCORDING TO OUR OPENING text, freedom in Christ depends upon the believer’s continuance in his “word.” What is the word of Jesus? Briefly, we might say that it is his teachings, particularly those instructions which pertain to his footstep followers. This counsel emanated from his Heavenly Father, for Jesus

said, “The words that I speak unto you I speak not of myself: but the Father that dwelleth in me, he doeth the works.” (John 14:10) In a prayer near the close of his ministry, Jesus said of his disciples, “I have given unto them the words which thou gavest me.”—John 17:8

The teachings of Jesus were a true reflection of the plan of God for mankind’s salvation as set forth by God’s inspired servants throughout the entire Bible. Continuance in this doctrine is a prerequisite to our abiding in the grace of God and enjoying the freedom which is provided for us through Jesus. Holding fast to the Word of Truth is essential to obtaining the fruition of our glorious hope. Paul

speaks of those “who by patient continuance in well doing seek for glory and honour and immortality, eternal life.”—Rom. 2:7

While the teachings of Jesus embraced the whole plan of God, of special concern to us, his followers, are those matters which relate to our discipleship. What is involved in being a disciple of Christ? Jesus said to Peter, “If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me.” (Matt. 16:24) Note that this is a denial of self. It is the renunciation of self and all that this implies.

Different illustrations of this are given in the New Testament. One of these is that of symbolic “beheading.” (Rev. 20:4) What this means is that we give up our own wills, and accept Christ’s headship over our lives. It is thus that we become qualified for membership in his body, as outlined by Paul in the 12th chapter of I Corinthians, verses 12-27. Every member in this body has a function to perform, even as in a natural body, but only the Head does the directing, for all the members have renounced the right to direct their own lives. It is incumbent upon them to seek, through study of the Word and through prayer, to determine the will of the Lord, their Head, under all circumstances.

THE “STRAIT” GATE

Jesus said, “Strait is the gate, and narrow is the way, which leadeth unto life, and few there be that find it.” (Matt. 7:14) The Greek word here translated “strait” has the thought of being “narrow from objects standing close about.” Because this gate is made narrow in such fashion, it is difficult

to enter, and after we pass through the gate, the way beyond is also narrow and difficult. However, it is by continuance in this narrow way that we will “know the truth, and the truth” will make us free.

How many things there are which are standing close about to limit easy access to the narrow way! Jesus said to his disciples, “A rich man shall hardly enter into the kingdom of heaven. And again I say unto you, It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of God.” (Matt. 19:23,24) The “eye of a needle” here mentioned by Jesus is evidently a reference to the small gate within one of the larger entrances in the wall surrounding Jerusalem. This small opening was called the “needle’s eye.” A camel could pass through this gate only by having its load removed, and edging through on its knees.

Thus we are reminded that earthly riches are one of the things “standing close about” which makes the gate to the narrow way very difficult to enter. These riches are not necessarily of money, lands or goods. They might be earthly ambitions, pleasure, friendships, or any of the transitory things of the world and the flesh which stand in one’s way and make difficult the entering of the narrow way of sacrifice. One may not actually have riches, but have a consuming ambition to attain them. This too would stand in the way and make it difficult to enter the gate into the narrow way.

THE NARROW WAY

As previously noted, after entering the strait gate we find ourselves in a way that is also narrow and difficult. It is here that we need the quality of

steadfastness and of patient endurance. To pass through the gate calls for the renouncing of self, and this denial must continue throughout our entire Christian course if we are to keep rejoicing in the Lord and in his Truth. Such endurance must be to the very end of the narrow way, the way that ends in death, if we are to receive the crown of life.—James 1:12; Rev. 2:10

It is difficult to maintain a position of full consecration to the Lord, for on every side there are influences which would draw us away from our steadfastness if we willfully permit them to do so. The spirit of the world and its pleasures are ever close at hand to attract the disciple of Christ—though more so for some than for others. The love of the flesh for ease and comfort might also lure one away from full devotion to the Lord's will which calls for sacrifice in his service.

As disciples we are followers of Jesus, and he is our great Exemplar. Paul admonished us to look unto him who is “the author and finisher of our faith; who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is set down at the right hand of the throne of God. For consider him that endured such contradiction of sinners against himself, lest ye be wearied and faint in your minds. Ye have not yet resisted unto blood, striving against sin.”—Heb. 12:2-4

The Hebrew brethren to whom Paul wrote had endured much. In the beginning of their walk in the narrow way they endured “a great fight of affliction.” They had been made a “gazingstock both by reproaches and afflictions;” and as they “became companions of them that *(Continued on page 38)*

(Continued from page 27) were so used,” they “took joyfully the spoiling” of their goods. (Heb. 10:32-34) However, as Paul pointed out to these brethren, they had not yet, as had Jesus, “resisted unto blood”; that is, they had not as yet fully laid down their lives walking in the narrow way of sacrifice.

THE EASY YOKE

Jesus said, “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) The promise here of the easy yoke and the light burden is not out of harmony with Jesus’ teachings relative to the difficulties of the narrow way of sacrifice. The contrast is with the burden which the scribes and Pharisees had laid upon the people—burdens which were too heavy for most of them to bear. The yoke of the Mosaic Law was also a most restricting one for the imperfect Israelites to wear.

Jesus offered his disciples a new yoke, one which they could share with him. When placed upon cattle or other beasts of burden it is a restricting device. We cannot think of wearing a yoke of any kind without being reminded of bondage. In our case, the bondage is to Jesus, for sharing the yoke with him means that we go where he wants us to go. When a pair of oxen are harnessed together their freedom for individual action is lost. They must pull in a coordinated fashion and work together.

It is thus that we enjoy liberty in Christ. He is our yokefellow, and we have full privilege to work

with him in his yoke. He is the one who decides the direction in which we should go. If we gladly yield our wills to him, the yoke is easy, and the burden we bear together is light. Nevertheless, if we resist, we will find ourselves in a very difficult position, feeling restrained and burdened. On the contrary, if we work with Jesus in the yoke, he helps us to bear our share of the load, thus making the yoke much easier and the burden lighter.

KNOWING THE TRUTH

Jesus said in our opening text that if we continue in his Word we shall know the Truth. This means the Truth concerning him and concerning his Father's plans and purposes for the salvation of Father Adam and all of his human posterity. It means also that we shall know the Truth concerning our own part in the plan of God—the privilege we have of walking in the Master's footsteps. We come to know more and more by precept and by experience why the Christian way is called a narrow way. We learn of the restrictions imposed upon those who travel this way against yielding to the influences of the world and the cravings of our fallen flesh.

As we grow in grace and in knowledge we learn that there is a real and blessed purpose in our being called to walk in the narrow way. We find that while this way will lead to life for ourselves, if we are faithful to the end, it also means that the faithful ones will share with Jesus in his rulership as the "seed" through which all the families of the earth will be blessed. (Gal. 3:8,16,27-29) We learn from the Scriptures that in the future kingdom of God which will be established on the earth, all

mankind will have the privilege of attaining life and will travel over a different way, a “highway,” also called the “way of holiness,” which will lead to perfection of human life.—Isa. 35:8

MADE FREE

These are but some of the points of truth which are learned and appreciated by those who continue in the word of Jesus; and, as Jesus said, those who know this Truth and continue in it are made free by it. Those who first heard these wonderful words of life from the lips of Jesus replied to him, saying, “We be Abraham’s seed, and were never in bondage to any man: how sayest thou, Ye shall be made free?” (John 8:33) These Israelites attempted to make themselves believe that they had never been in bondage, but in reality they were. Even then they were under subjection to the Roman Empire; they were also in bondage to their own religious leaders, and to a law which they could not keep.

However, in his reply to their question Jesus ignored these aspects of bondage, and explained what he really had in mind when he said that the Truth would make those free who would continue in it. He said, “Whosoever committeth sin is the servant of sin. And the servant abideth not in the house for ever: but the Son abideth ever. If the Son therefore shall make you free, ye shall be free indeed.”—John 8:34-36

It is plain from this that Jesus was referring to being made free from the bondage of sin, and this, he said, would be accomplished through him. The whole world, through the transgression of our first parents, is hostage to sin, and is held in a slavery to

it which leads eventually to death. Jesus alone can and does give freedom from this bondage. He prepared the way for this through his work of redemption in giving his life a ransom for all. By faith, those who accept this provision, and demonstrate their faith by their works, are released from slavery to sin by the precious blood of Jesus Christ.—Rom. 3:24,25; Eph. 1:3,7; I Pet. 1:18-21; I John 1:7

This is the freedom that is attained and maintained by continuing in the word of Jesus; that is, by faithfulness to the terms of discipleship which he so clearly set forth. This freedom does not imply liberty of action as we lay down our lives in his service, but it does call for faithfulness in the divine cause, which will lead us to become “joint-heirs with Christ; if so be that we suffer with him, that we may be also glorified together.”—Rom.8:17

Paul wrote, “For when we died with Christ we were set free from the power of sin. And since we died with Christ, we know we will also live with him.” (Rom. 6:7,8, *New Living Translation*) The reference here to being dead with Christ means being participants with him in the likeness of his sacrificial death. The *Revised Version* states that those who die with Christ are “justified from sin”; that is, they are justified, or made right, in the sight of God. This freedom from sin during the present age is granted only to those who have dedicated their lives to continuing in the “word” of Christ. Their liberty is on the basis of faith, and they have the privilege of laying down their justified humanity as a “living sacrifice,” as the apostle points out in Romans 12:1.

Paul adds the admonition, “Do not let sin control the way you live; do not give in to sinful desires.” (Rom. 6:12, *NLT*) This is one of our great struggles as Christians. Having been made free from sin, and now laying down our justified lives in sacrifice, we must not allow sin to hold sway over us. We must hate iniquity and struggle against all the efforts of our fallen flesh to serve sin rather than the Lord Jesus with whom we are yoked.

PROPER USE OF LIBERTY

Paul wrote that “where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty.” (II Cor. 3:17) Those who have renounced self and become filled with the Spirit of the Lord as their motivating influence have full liberty to lay down their lives in his service, following his instructions as they are outlined in his Word. They do not have the liberty to walk in one direction while their yokefellow, Jesus Christ, goes in another. If they do not work with him, then they are in bondage. The Spirit of the Lord does not grant anyone freedom to do as he pleases, except as he desires to do the will of his Heavenly Father.

The Apostle James presents a meaningful lesson. “Be ye doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving your own selves. For if any be a hearer of the word, and not a doer, he is like unto a man beholding his natural face in a glass: For he beholdeth himself, and goeth his way, and straightway forgetteth what manner of man he was. But whoso looketh into the perfect law of liberty, and continueth therein, he being not a forgetful hearer, but a doer of the work, this man shall be blessed in his deed.”
—James 1:22-25

From this it is evident that “the perfect law of liberty” is the law of the Christian as revealed in God’s Word. It is the law which, if continued therein, assures freedom from condemnation to death. It is also embodied in the “new commandment” which Jesus gave; the commandment which calls on his disciples to love one another as he loved them, and to lay down their lives for one another. Only by looking into this law, and applying it, can we expect to be blessed of the Heavenly Father and reap the benefits of freedom in Christ.—John 13:34,35; I John 3:14-18

James presents the Truth concerning a common human failing, which is to be hearers of the Word and not doers. How easy it is to read and study the harmonious and inspiring plan of God as we find it in the Bible, and do nothing about it, except to be glad that God has such a plan! However, the truths of the divine purpose are in the Word in order to guide and strengthen us in the laying down of our lives. (Ps. 119:105) We are to manifest self-sacrificing love for our brethren, and for all mankind. It is this that the Truth gives us the liberty of doing.

STANDING FAST IN LIBERTY

The Apostle Paul wrote, “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) The “yoke of bondage” here referred to was the Law Covenant under which the Israelites served the Lord from Mount Sinai to Jesus’ death on the cross. It was a yoke of bondage because of the inability of the Israelites to meet the conditions

of the Law, and they did not yet have available to them the merit of Christ's ransom sacrifice to cover their unwilling imperfections. As Christians, we wear the yoke of Christ, but this does not denote bondage. That is because we delight to do our Heavenly Father's will, and because the merit of Jesus' sacrifice guarantees that as we lay down our lives in divine service our sacrifice will be "holy and acceptable unto God." (Rom. 12:1; I Pet. 2:5) What a glorious freedom from bondage even while wearing the "yoke" of Christ!

MADE FREE BY THE SON

Our liberty as Christians, then, is that which we enjoy because we have been made free by the Son, and those who have thus been made free are "free indeed." (John 8:36) This is an individual freedom from the death condemnation, made possible through the redemptive work of Christ, and which comes to us through a faith which has been demonstrated by the dedication of ourselves to the doing of God's will as expressed through Christ.

As we have seen, this dedication to the divine cause makes us yokefellows of Jesus Christ. We are made free from sin that we might serve righteousness, and our service of the righteous cause of the Heavenly Father is the laying down of our lives in sacrifice that others may be blessed. How blessed is the thought that while we are sacrificing our little all in divine service we can have the assurance that there is no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus. (Rom. 8:1,2) How precious is the truth that makes us free!—vss. 31-39 ■