



## THE BIBLICAL VIEW OF FREEDOM

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### A UNIVERSAL THIRST FOR FREEDOM

Throughout human history, people of all cultures have sought freedom. Some have emphasized inner spiritual or emotional freedom, and others freedom from external restraints (such as slavery or political freedom). Hindus seek an experience of oneness with the universe that frees them from the illusion of this world of distinction. Buddhists seek enlightenment that involves a detachment from desiring anything in this world. Atheists want to be free from the constraints of any objective moral rules.

In the political arena, there are a variety of liberation theologies. Gustavo Gutiérrez wrote his *Theology of Liberation* with a focus on the political and economic situation in Latin America. James Cone wrote *A Black Theology of Liberation* to develop a black theology that identified with the oppressed. Others have developed feminist liberation theology that focuses on cultural problems that have limited women's freedom. Most of the above perspectives involve a freedom from constraints, but are not clear about what the liberated situation would look like. This "freedom from" is at the heart of our secular culture. In this article we will discuss the biblical view of freedom, first contrasting it with other views so we can see its significance more clearly.

### CULTURE: FREEDOM FROM

Many people in our culture believe freedom to be a lack of norms, rules, or laws restraining us from doing what we want to do or be. You often hear the refrain "whatever is true for you is true for you and whatever is true for me is true for me. Nobody can tell me what to do." People who hold to this view believe in "freedom from" any external values. If God exists then this freedom is limited. Woody Allen in his film "Crimes and Misdemeanors" portrays God as a cosmic eye who is always watching us. You can't escape his gaze and his judgment of your life. Jean Paul Sartre, the atheist existentialist, went so far as to

argue that if God exists we couldn't be free. God would be like a cosmic voyeur, always looking through the keyhole watching every little thing in our lives. This kind of "freedom from" is not the biblical view of freedom, which is more of a "freedom from in order to be free to." We need to be freed from a bondage to sin in order to be free to serve Jesus. It is only in the latter state that we can know the freedom and flourishing that we were created to experience.

## CLASSICAL FREEDOM

Before we look more directly at the biblical view of freedom, it would be helpful to draw a further contrast with the classical Greek view of freedom. In Greek philosophy, freedom, *eleutheros*, was primarily used in a political sense. First, someone who is free is a full citizen of the city state, *polis*, in contrast to a slave who did not have the rights of a citizen. To be free meant to have freedom to speak openly and decide what you want to do. It is important to note that this freedom was fenced in by the law. In order to preserve freedom, there needed to be political order governed by law that was enforced. Note that:

*Freedom, for Plato and Aristotle, is essential to a state. The best constitution guarantees the greatest freedom (Thucydides). This freedom is freedom within the law which establishes and secures it...Law protects freedom against the caprice of the tyrant or the mass....Democracy achieves this best by allowing the same rights to all citizens (cf. Plato, Aristotle, Herodotus). [However, if] the law of self replaces the law of the politeia....it leads to the rise of demagogues and opens the door to tyranny.<sup>i</sup>*

In other words, this freedom was within the structure of the law.

In Stoic philosophy, freedom was inwardly directed. Since people could not always control internal events, emphasis was placed on an internal detachment from this world and anything that would bind you to it, such as anger, anxiety, pity, and the fear of death. Individual reason was to be brought into harmony with the cosmic reason. There was a constant struggle to maintain this detachment (*atarchia*). Freedom was inner freedom for the Stoics and primarily outer freedom for Plato and Aristotle.

## FREEDOM IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

In the Old Testament, freedom was primarily a freedom from slavery. There was provision in the Law for the freedom of Israelite slaves (probably like indentured servants) every seven years in the sabbatical year (Ex. 21:2ff). The previous "owner" was to be generous in giving gifts that would enable these freed ones to set up a new life (Deut. 15:12ff).

In a larger sense, freedom was precarious for Israelites. God by his grace delivered them from slavery in Egypt (Ex. 20:2; Deut. 7:8). They repeatedly needed to be delivered from foreign oppression by the Judges. Time and again, a generation came along that didn't know and follow the Lord and a foreign conqueror would make their lives difficult until the Lord raised up a deliverer. When God's people were disobedient, they often lost their freedom. The Assyrian conquest of the kingdom (II Kings 17:7-23) and the Babylonian captivity of the southern kingdom (II Kings 21:10-15; 22:19f; 23:25ff) are illustrations of this pattern. In

later Judaism, freedom movements arose to gain political freedom in order to allow religious freedom (among other things). The Maccabees and the Zealots are only a couple illustrations of such movements.

This freedom was often referenced in the prophets. Jesus's inaugural sermon echoed this theme (Luke 4: 18-19). Isaiah 61:1 said:

*The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me,*

*Because the Lord has anointed me*

*To bring good news to the afflicted;*

*He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted,*

*To proclaim liberty to the captives,*

*and freedom to the prisoners.*

This proclamation of “liberty” and “freedom” was a mark of the Messiah’s message.

There is a consistent thread through the Old Testament pointing to the need for inner and spiritual renewal. Many passages could be cited but perhaps a couple could be illustrative of this theme. In Ezekiel 36:26-30 it says,

Moreover, I will give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit within you and cause you to walk in my statutes, and you will be careful to observe my ordinances and you will live in the land that I gave your forefathers...and I will call for the grain and multiply it, and I will not bring famine on you. And I will multiply the fruit of the tree and the produce of the field.

Notice here that the inner rebirth leads to outer flourishing and safety.

Similarly, the classic passage in II Chronicles 7:14, “If...my people who are called by my name humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, will forgive their sin, and will heal their land.” Again, the inner change leads to outer or external consequences that extend not only to forgiveness but to healing in the land.

## **FREEDOM IN THE NEW TESTAMENT**

The predominant note of the New Testament is not political freedom but freedom in Christ from bondage to sin, the Law, Satan, the old man, and death. It is not that political freedom or freedom from slavery was unimportant but that there was an even deeper bondage that had to be overcome first of all. With the Greeks, the problem was with the mind, but in the New Testament, the problem was the bondage of the will.

The problem is that even if you were politically free you could still be in bondage. Human will is not at this present time neutral but it is captivated by sin. Humans by nature “love the darkness” and “hate the light” (John 3: 19:20). Jesus speaks about this freedom in the classic verses in John 8:31-32: “Jesus therefore was saying to those Jews who had believed in Him, ‘If you abide in my words, then you are truly disciples of mine, and you shall know the truth and the truth shall make you free.’”

The scribes and Pharisees immediately respond to this statement of Jesus by arguing that they are Abraham’s offspring and have never been slaves, so how can Jesus say that “You shall become free?” Jesus responds that anyone who sins becomes a slave of sin, but “If therefore the Son shall make you free, you shall be free indeed” (John 8:36). Jesus’ death and resurrection graciously applied to our lives liberates us from bondage to sin so that we can live a redirected life. Calvin points out that although we have freedom it may not be perfect: “Freedom has its degrees according to the measure of their faith; and therefore Paul, though clearly made free, still groans and longs after perfect freedom (Rom. 7:24).”<sup>ii</sup>

It is the truth that will make us free. We are, in our natural sinful state, captive to lies. We don’t see reality as it is. We deny what we know deep down is true (Romans 1:20-25), “exchanging the truth of God for a lie” (Rom. 1:25). We live in a state of unreality. If truth is that which corresponds to reality then throwing off lies and deception frees us to see reality for what it is. We see our own slavery to sin and can receive forgiveness and new power to live in accordance with reality. We can be what we were created to be. Truth leads to freedom.

We are historical beings that have a past, present, and future. We don’t reinvent ourselves at each moment, but are influenced by past patterns and choices. We are according to the old self (sinful nature) directed away from God, saying, in effect, “My will be done.” In Christ, we are freed from this bondage in order to say “Thy will be done.” We are headed down a road away from God and have been turned around 180 degrees by God’s grace so that we are now pursuing our Lord rather than running away from him. We were serving sin, but now we are serving Christ.

But how can service or being a servant be freedom? Because we are made in a particular way, for a purpose, and to function in a designated fashion. One analogy sometimes used is a train. If a train stays on the tracks, it can function well transporting people and goods from one place to another. If the train goes off the tracks it leads to pain (and death) for people and a destruction of its cargo. The train needs the tracks to function well as a train. There are limits to where that train can go and the path it needs to follow.

To use another analogy, consider a car. All cars come with manufacturers’ recommendations for maximum efficiency. You need to change the oil or the spark plugs at regular intervals. For most cars, you don’t put diesel fuel in the gas tank because it causes real problems. Similarly, you don’t put water or sugar in the gas tank or it will make the car run poorly or stop it altogether. Just as with the train and the car, there are certain laws, rules, and norms that need to be followed in order to flourish as a human being. We need to follow the Creator’s instructions for recommended use as given in the Bible. God’s laws or Jesus’s commands are not arbitrary but show us the way to joy. This way to joy must involve saying “no” to certain actions or patterns of life that will get us off track. God’s character, his revelation in the Bible, and our own nature correspond to each other. We are to be holy because God is holy (I Peter 1:16). To act in an unholy fashion is to violate God our Creator, his word, and our own being. There are direct consequences to us for violating God’s specifications for how to live. For instance, there are sometimes physical consequences for violating God’s sexual commands such as sexually-transmitted diseases, as well as

emotional and spiritual damage. There are many other examples that could be given. We need an intimate relationship to God, closeness with other people, clear vocational direction, proper sexual conduct, sleep, exercise, and nutrition. If we habitually fall short in any of these areas it can lead to dissatisfaction, lack of purpose, a feeling of inadequacy, or even a crisis of meaning or purpose in our life.

There is a structure to reality rooted in God's nature, his creation, and our own being. We can choose to live autonomously, attempting to be "free from" any restriction but we will never experience true freedom by following that path. True freedom is living in the way we were created to live. Another way of describing this life after the Fall is to serve Christ our Redeemer. We are created in, through, by, and for Him (Col 1: 16). This service, not surprisingly, leads to flourishing. This truth will make us free (John 8:32). In Christ we are free indeed (John 8:36).

The Apostle Paul expands the implications of this freedom more fully. See especially Romans 6:18f where we are said to be "freed from sin" so that we can be "slaves to righteousness" (Rom. 6:18). Later, he writes that we are "freed from sin" to be "enslaved to God" (Rom. 6:22). Being "enslaved to God" leads to "eternal life" (vs. 22 and 23) and a fullness of life in the present time.

We are not only freed from sin but also freed from death. Paul says that the outcome of our sin is death (Rom. 6:21) and that the "wages of sin is death" (Rom. 6:23). But Christ has now freed us from the power of death. Note that, "Death is swallowed up in victory. O death, where is your sting? ...but thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ" (I Cor. 15:54-57). We may fear dying but need not fear death itself.

We are also freed from the Law (Rom. 7:3-6). It is not that the Law is bad. In fact, it is said to be "holy and righteous and good" (Rom. 7:12). The Law is even said to be "spiritual" (Rom. 7:14). What are we, then "freed from?" We are freed from trying to earn our salvation, from duty as a wearisome practice, from the condemnation in our own nature, from having disobeyed the Law. We are not "under the Law but under grace" in that sense (Romans 6:14). But it is not a contradiction of this when Jesus says "If you love me, you will obey my commandments." We are now freed from the condemnation and external adherence to the Law in order to now serve out of hearts full of grace, out of desire (not merely duty) and joyous obedience.

We are now called to freedom. Paul writes in Galatians that "it was for freedom that Christ set us free" (Gal. 5:1) and "you were called to freedom" (Gal. 5:13). We now experience the glorious liberty of being children of God (Rom. 8:21). We have the Spirit and "where the Spirit of the Lord is there is liberty" (II Cor. 3:17).

We are free but nevertheless subject to the "law of liberty" (James 1:25; and again in James 2:12, the "law of liberty"). Peter Davids says of James's phrase, "He feels perfectly comfortable with enjoying grace within the structure of ethical rules."<sup>iii</sup> Similarly, Alec Motyer maintains, "When we come into bondage to the Word of God we come into freedom, because the Word liberates us from the lustful pull of our own nature, and brings us on via the pathway of hard obedience, into new realms of living for God. It is the Law of Liberty."<sup>iv</sup> Law and liberty are not contradictory. Just as a train needs tracks in order to experience "trainness," and a car needs manufacturers' specifications to continue in its "carness," so humans need to follow the Creator's manual of guidelines to experience "humanness."

## FROM INNER TO OUTER FREEDOM

The emphasis of the New Testament is not political, economic, or religious freedom. However there is a sense in which we can say, as we saw in the Old Testament, that new inner freedom eventually leads to consequences in the outer world.

Jesus did not fight, as some expected the Messiah to do, for a violent revolutionary overthrow of the Romans. But there are passages that point towards the importance of personal and political freedom. In I Corinthians 7, Paul emphasizes that the believer should stay in the condition in which they were called (I Cor. 7:20, 24). However, if the slave had an opportunity to be free, then take it. “Were you called while a slave? Do not worry about it; but if you are able to be free rather do that.” (I Cor. 7:21). In Paul’s letter to Philemon, the Apostle asks him to receive back Onesimus, “no longer a slave but more than a slave, a beloved brother” (Philemon 16). He is urged to “accept him as you would me” (vs. 17). Paul believes that Philemon will “do even more than what I say.” Presumably, this is an urging for Philemon to declare Onesimus the slave – free.

The inner freedom Christ came to bring has often been the garden out of which other freedoms grow. The themes of Exodus “Let my people go” – and of Jesus of Nazareth’s sermon – (freedom to the captive) have often been preached. Like Jesus we “proclaim justice” (Matt. 12:18-21) with mercy and compassion. The Holy Spirit is sent to convict concerning sin, righteousness, and judgment (John 16:7f). It seems that this applies not only in personal life but in public life. We are to be prophetic – proclaiming his excellencies in a world of darkness (I Peter 2L9-10). While we can have inner freedom without outer freedom, it is better to have both. The inner freedom gives birth to freedom in public life.

Redemption, above all, applies to all of life. Not only are we redeemed from our sin (personal), but we are brought into a new community – the Body of Christ (I Cor. 12:13) (corporate). Our redemption, though, extends beyond the personal and corporate to the whole cosmos. Acts 3:21 says that God’s ultimate goal is the “restoration of all things.” The whole “creation itself will also be set free from its slavery to corruption into the freedom of the glory of the children of God” (Romans 8:21). We will ultimately live on a new earth. There are two Greek words for new – *neos*, meaning totally new, and *kainos*, meaning renewed. Almost every time the Bible uses the word new, *kainos* (renewed) is used. God’s redemption will extend to all of life.

Freedom cannot be limited to inner transformation but must of necessity extend to all of life. Jesus not only preached and taught, but healed peoples’ bodies. People were freed inwardly and outwardly. It should not be surprising that where Christ’s inner freedom is experienced, the natural outworking is towards political, economic, and religious freedom. There are many biblical passages and themes that could be brought to bear that demonstrate the holistic freedom and redemption that Jesus came to inaugurate.

No wonder that believers have been on the forefront of freedom movements for the abolition of slavery both past (i.e. William Wilberforce) and present (i.e. International Justice Mission). Many believers have worked to fight for religious freedom nationally and internationally (i.e. Barnabus Fund). We are called to fight against injustice wherever we see it in personal and public life.

Freedom from the bondage to sin, the Law, death, and lies about reality will inevitably push further and further out till it leads to freedom in all areas of life. Inner freedom often has led to outer freedom.

## CONCLUSION

Here are some implications from what we have observed.

1. Freedom is not autonomy or doing what you feel like doing without any constraints.
2. Freedom involves structure. Bondage to Christ allows us to be free to be what we are created to be.
3. Freedom is within the context of Law. We are not under the obedience to the Law as a condition of salvation, but the moral Law and Christ's commands give us a guide to know how to live and to love.
4. We are truly free when we know the truth about ourselves and the world. This means throwing off the lies and deceptions to which we are so often captive.
5. Salvation is not primarily political liberation (as in some theologies). But God often intervened when his people were oppressed by unjust totalitarian leaders (Exodus, Judges,.).
6. Inner renewal often leads to outer consequences and renewal of the land.
7. The Bible doesn't prescribe one type of government but freedom (political, economic, and religious) is consistent with (not contradictory to) the Bible.
8. Inner freedom inevitably drives toward outer freedom. You can have political (economic and religious) freedom and still be in bondage to sin. You can have inner freedom in an oppressed situation. But inner and outer freedoms are the most ideal state for human beings (Micah 4:4).

With this background in mind, it is not surprising that freedom has become a cry for many people that are believers. The Declaration of Independence sets forth our God-given rights to "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness." We have seen the cries for freedom that led to pulling down the wall between East and West Berlin. Believers should be the most free to enjoy life and God's creation, as long as it is within the structure of how God has made us. We are not free from God-ordained obligations, but we are free to live life as God intended it to be lived.

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<sup>i</sup> Kittel, Gerhard and Friedrich, Gerhard, eds. *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*. William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company: Grand Rapids, MI, 1985, p. 224.

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- <sup>ii</sup> Calvin, John. *Commentary on the Gospel of John*, Vol. I, Baker Book House: Grand Rapids, MI, 1989, p. 342.
- <sup>iii</sup> Davids, Peter. On James 2:12. *New International Biblical Commentary*. Hendrickson Publishers: Peabody, MA, p. 74.
- <sup>iv</sup> Motyer, J.A. *The Tests of Faith*, InterVarsity Press: London, 1972, p. 36.