



The Necessity & Refusal of Freedom

Eugene Peterson begins his prayed exploration of the everyday implications of the book of Galatians¹, referencing a conversation Jesus had with those who believed that he indeed lighted the way of being fully human in relation to God, one another, and all creation. To these whose heartfelt admission was a desire to no longer walk in darkness, trying the knobs of every door they stumbled across hoping it opened to abundant life now and forever; to these who confessed a belief enough to follow Jesus into the light of life, Jesus says,

If you hold to my teachings, abide in my word, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free...So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed." (John 8:31-32, 36)

The irony of Jesus' pronouncement is that those listening, those same that believed his words which were enlightening them to the way of the Kingdom of God, took offense to the idea that they needed to be freed. In fact, by the end of the chapter, these believers are ready to stone the one in whom they believed (John 8:59). Living rightly with God and his creations (i.e., righteously), according to Jesus, was a matter of freedom. Such righteousness required us to be set free and live as ones who are "free indeed." But, apparently, freedom, the freedom Jesus brings about anyway, is not something everyone is ready for, and much less desire.

A generation later, we see that the requirement of freedom to the fullness of life with God in His Kingdom continued to cause consternation and division among those who believed in Jesus. We are two thirds the way through Paul's letter to his faith family in Galatia when we read Paul's re-articulation of Jesus' assertion, "For freedom Christ has set us free..." To arrive at this declarative moment, Paul had to convince his brothers and sisters in Christ two things.

First, Paul had to set the foundation, demonstrating that the historical and experiential evidence of "the faith he once tried to destroy," but "is now preaching," was always the good news of freedom from enslavement and "imprisonment." His is the same message as Jesus, for, the story of Scripture is a story of being set free. Indeed, the stories of our lives in Jesus are stories of being set free. Anything less than freedom in Jesus is no gospel, nothing worthy of the title "good news" that "*delivers us from the present evil age*, according to the will of our God and Father."

Second, Paul had to convince those to whom he had a great affection, and who at one time shared that fondness, that the primary entanglement confining them and reducing their love and life was not their religious practices or their knowledge of the spiritual life; but their *faith*. Paul uses the word "faith" some twenty-two times in this little letter, each time anchoring faith in the efficacy of Jesus' death and resurrection.

¹ Eugene Peterson, *Traveling Light: modern meditations on St. Paul's letter of freedom*.

Freedom is not won; it is received. Freedom is not perfected through our desperate, delusional, or even genuine effort; it is the natural consequence of the gift received with faith.

Having convinced his friends, or at least offering a convincing argument, Paul concludes his correspondence describing the option awaiting them each morning to live free in “faith working through love” or to “submit again to a yoke of slavery,” in its various forms. Paul is not a fan of a plethora of choices, “whatever one sows, that also will he reap.” The way he sees it, there is a life in-step with the Spirit, bearing the produce of the kingdom in everyday ways, and there is a life in-step with everything, anything else that bears not produces but division. In the end, it’s “the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ,” that sets the choices apart, demonstrating their fundamental, temporal, and eternal differences. We can avoid the cross and its implications for daily living, but to do so would avoid freedom as well.

For Paul, he chooses to bear on his “body the marks of Jesus,” taking on the yoke of Jesus, “Walking with him, working with him—watching how Jesus does it. **Learning the unforced rhythms of grace...living freely and lightly.**” And, his prayer is that we, his family of faith, would take up the same grace.

Nothing Has Changed...Everything Has Changed

We have more “freedom” in our daily living than has been experienced by humanity in history, and yet we may be more desperate and in need of true freedom than ever before. Though we live in the “land of the free” and the “home of the brave,” we are no more inoculated to the forces (internally and externally) that “spy out our freedom in Christ Jesus,” ever acting to “bring us into slavery,” than those who heard “freedom” spoken from the lips of Jesus or those in the region of Galatia who had received a gospel of freedom from the Spirit via Paul and his associates. Current research suggests that we are a nation trapped like few others in history, entangled in debt, inhibited by fear and anxiousness, subjugated to the power of what’s “trending,” repressed by limitlessness, every movement monitored and adjudicated, addicted to a variety of the deplorable and the lauded, isolated through constant connection, confined to cultural identities, entombed within the recycling stream of “self-help.”

It has been our experience these last seven-plus years in Dallas that our readiness and desire for the free life in Jesus has not significantly increased. Like the believers following Jesus and the faith family responding to Paul, we find ourselves imprisoned out of ignorance or arrogance, unaware of the depth of our slavery. Satisfied with our fantasies of freedom, we turn to any number of manifestations of “a different gospel”—at best. At worst, we pick up stones to throw at “the light of life,” hoping to put out the lamp and return to unimpeded denial of our bondage within the darkness. This is why we will be traveling through Galatians together, because nothing in our humanity has changed even if everything looks different.

Our Prayerful Intention...Praying To Stay Together

As our scriptures demonstrate, we dare not “underestimate the difficulties in living free for all, of traveling light: it is persistently hard.”² True freedom places requirements on us and exposes us to things we are often unprepared to experience. Free and easy are not synonyms. The difficulty of living freely and lightly is why we cannot live free unaccompanied. We need the testimony of those in antiquity who have striven to put on the yoke of Christ alone, and we need the encouragement of a faith family joining with us in our learning the unforced rhythms of grace. And yet, aspiring to travel light is a worthwhile endeavor, and perhaps one most needed in our allotted period and boundary of our dwelling place. Because freedom is essential for all to be fully human, to living rightly with God and one another, “Christians, in touch with the God who grants us a freedom far richer than its political and cultural versions, are in the privileged but awesomely responsible position of pioneers of the free life.”³

Over the coming months—and the years that follow—our prayerful intention is to help one another be in touch with God who grants us freedom beyond our daily fantasies and grow in the exercising of the awesome responsibilities of pioneers of a free life for the sake of our co-workers, children, friends, and neighbors. To unite us in our prayed expedition, let’s join in addressing “God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ, who gave himself for our sins to deliver us from the present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father,” with these words adapted from Ernest Campell’s prayer:

We join our prayers today in intercession for the men and women in our faith family, in our daily lives, and in our city who are trapped:

those who are trapped in poverty and debt with no sign of relief;
those who are trapped in jobs and stages of life that engage but a fraction of their powers;
those who are trapped in families and relationships where love has ebbed away;
those who are trapped in unwanted alliances out of which they cannot break;
those who are trapped by the fear of discovery, or by dependency on others, or by the need for drugs, or by an addiction to any other distraction.

O Father, whose will it is that we be free, and who did give Your Son that
we might be delivered from all coercive powers;
make us examples of Your freedom, proclaimers of Your freedom, and
instruments of Your freedom;
snap our chains that we may loose the chains of others.

Then shall the joy of the liberated rise from the earth like a mighty hymn of praise, Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

² Ibid., 15.

³ Ibid.