

Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

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Freedoms and Liberties: Defenders of Liberty

God created man to enjoy liberty. Liberty is not license and therefore there are always constraints for the greater good. Liberty is not about self but is linked to the welfare of others. So, I don't have liberty to steal, rape or murder. I don't have liberty to do what I want. This is at the very heart of the story of the Garden of Eden (Genesis 2:15-3:24). God provides man with extraordinary liberty by which he enjoys communion with God, complete harmony with nature and the joy of human relationships. God also set bounds to this liberty and tells Adam what he cannot do. The story of the Fall of man and the consequences of sin are well known. It describes the distance it placed between God and man and the enormous damage done to the liberty man enjoyed. He no longer experienced the fellowship he had with God, the harmony of nature or the beauty and balance of human relationships. The world quickly descended into a place where strife, greed, violence, murder and slavery abounded.

Today, in the UK, we may seem protected from the excesses of these things but there is still plenty of evidence in our own society of the breakdown of human relationships, disregard and disrespect towards others and damage to our natural resources. You may disagree with the theology but you can't disagree that these fundamental problems are as much in evidence now as ever in spite of all our social, economic and scientific advances.

The Bible also illustrates how God intervenes to give true liberty and empowers his people to act in defence of it. There are some great examples of this in the Old Testament. Abraham was brought to understand the liberty faith in God brings and acts to free his nephew Lot when he was captured in battle. Jacob, enslaved by his own deception, recognises the grace of God and is delivered from the house of Laban. Joseph becomes a slave because of his faithfulness to God and that faithfulness equips him to deliver Egypt and his own family from a natural disaster. Moses leaves the unjust Egyptian society to become a shepherd and is used by God to set his people free from slavery. David as a keeper of sheep also learns about God to deliver his people from the terror of one man. The pre-exile prophets constantly warned of the moral slavery of the divided nation of Israel and how this would lead to physical slavery. During the exile, Daniel showed how spiritual liberty could be enjoyed and expressed in the most dangerous and volatile circumstances. Ezra and Nehemiah had the faith, against all the odds, to return a once idolatrous and captive nation to its own land and fellowship with God.

At the beginning of the New Testament we are introduced to John the Baptist who challenged the behaviour of the society of his day in the light of a coming Saviour. Which brings us to the greatest defender of liberty, the Lord Jesus Christ.

Now I would like to look at one of the most exciting passages in the Gospels. It starts in Mark 4:35 and continues through to Mark 5:43. I think it gives one of the clearest presentations of the Lord Jesus' power to bring people into the liberty of God's love. It starts with His power to free His disciples from fear. "On the same day, when evening had come, He said to them, 'Let us cross over to the other side.' Now when they had left the multitude, they took Him along in the boat as he was. And other little boats were also with Him. And a great wind-storm arose, and the waves beat into the boat, so that it was already filling. But He was in the stern, asleep on a pillow. And they awoke Him and said to him, 'Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?' Then He arose and rebuked the wind, and said to the sea, 'Peace, be still!' And the wind ceased and there was a great calm. But He said to them, 'Why are you so fearful? How is it that you have no faith?' And they feared exceedingly, and said to one another, 'Who can this be, that even the wind and the sea obey Him!'" (Mark 4:35-41)

This event begins in a remarkable way. At the end of an exhausting day of ministry, Jesus is taken by the disciples into a boat and quickly falls asleep. I say remarkable because in the tiny details of the Bible so much is conveyed. Here, the Saviour is presented as a man confining himself to the restrictions of humanity such as tiredness and the need to sleep. This is important in regards to what happens next. The storm which appears so suddenly makes the disciples, many of whom were seasoned fishermen who knew the lake, very afraid. Fear of the power of nature is understandable and wise but we can become incapacitated by fear. Our fears can make us slaves to circumstances and this is what Jesus addresses. The disciples wake up Jesus with the words "Do you not care that we are perishing?" This could have been simply a request for Him to help them control the boat in a perilous situation. What He does is free them from the situation altogether by controlling nature. The gentle Man who fell asleep in the boat is also the God of creation. He then asks the question "Why are you so fearful?" John tells us "God is love" (1 John

4:16) and that “perfect love casts out fear” (1 John 4:18). Then Jesus raises the issue of faith, “How is it that you have no faith?” This suggests that Jesus expected the disciples to understand that, whilst He was with them, they were safe. There was no need to wake Him - just believe in Him. This is the liberty of faith that God constantly wants us to understand and enjoy. It is a faith which gives us the liberty to transcend the most difficult circumstances.

It has been suggested by some commentators that the storm was raised by Satan (see Job 1:19) to prevent Jesus meeting Legion in the section following. Mark introduces us to Legion in Mark 5:1-9, “Then they came to the other side of the sea, to the country of the Gadarenes. And when He had come out of the boat, immediately there met Him out of the tombs a man with an unclean spirit, who had his dwelling among the tombs; and no one could bind him, not even with chains, because he had often been bound with shackles and chains. And the chains had been pulled apart by him, and the shackles broken in pieces; neither could anyone tame him. And always, night and day, he was in the mountains and in the tombs, crying out and cutting himself with stones. When he saw Jesus from afar, he ran and worshiped him. And he cried out with a loud voice and said, ‘What have I to do with you, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? I implore you by God that you do not torment me.’ For He said to him, ‘Come out of the man, unclean spirit!’ Then He asked him, ‘What is your name?’ And he answered, saying, ‘My name is Legion; for we are many.’” (Mark 5:1-9)

In the story of Legion we see Jesus as the defender of liberty by confronting the most powerful evil forces resident in one man. Legion is a vivid illustration of how human beings can be engulfed and completely controlled by evil influences. Technically, Legion was not a slave. In fact, no one could control him, but he was enslaved by internal influences of the most dreadful sort. Some might relegate the story to the ignorance of a past age but we cannot escape the power of the message. Today people are still controlled by a whole range of evil influences and the misuse of substances which have an incredibly damaging effect on society, effects such as inhumanity in war-torn countries, domestic violence, abuse of children, racism and corporate greed. These present day evils are the result of immoral, selfish and hateful influences and also substance misuse. They enslave individuals and inflict enormous damage upon society.

Jesus, the Son of God, deals with the cause of our problems and transforms us into people who enjoy and express the liberating power of God’s love. In Luke 4:18-19, the Lord Jesus read Isaiah 61:1-2 in the synagogue in Nazareth: “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.”

At the outset of His public ministry, Jesus explains that He had come to set people free. Legion epitomises someone who is enslaved. But, after the intervention of Jesus in his life, Legion is described as “sitting and clothed and in his right mind.” (Mark 5:15) What is surprising is that the people who had lived in fear of Legion for some considerable time were then afraid of the Person who had changed him into a gentle soul. They even plead with Jesus to leave their area. (Mark 5:17) Today we still see the same confusion of thought. If you extracted the spiritual side of the Gospel and were left only with the good behaviour it instils, there would still be a great benefit to society. If we undertook a national experiment in which everyone lived as Christ taught His disciples, then we would begin to see power of the liberty of God’s love. The reason this does not happen is that we have to deal with the fundamental issue of sin in our lives which only Christ can answer.

As Jesus returned to the boat, Legion pleaded to go with Him, but Jesus says, “Go home to your friends, and tell them what great things the Lord has done for you, and how he has had compassion on you.” (Mark 5:19) Legion responded by proclaiming throughout Decapolis all that Jesus had done for him.

When Jesus had reached the other side of the lake He was met by Jairus: “And behold, one of the rulers of the synagogue came, Jairus by name. And when he saw Him, he fell at His feet and begged him earnestly, saying, ‘My little daughter lies at the point of death. Come and lay your hands on her, that she may be healed, and she will live.’ So Jesus went with him, and a great multitude followed Him and thronged Him.” (Mark 5:22-24)

As Jesus goes with Jairus to his house a further story emerges: “Now a certain woman had a flow of blood for twelve years, and had suffered many things from many physicians. She had spent all that she had and was no better, but rather grew worse. When she heard about Jesus, she came behind Him in the crowd and touched His garment. For she said, ‘If only I may touch his clothes, I shall be made well.’ Immediately the fountain of her blood was dried up, and she felt in her body that she was healed of the affliction” (Mark 5:25-29).

This unnamed lady illustrates the power of faith in a hopeless situation. She was not like the disciples whom Jesus had to reprimand for having no faith. This lady discovered the liberating power of simple faith. When I was a child I remember playing at my grandmother’s house and getting a little bored. I noticed the light switch on the wall in the room I was playing in and decided to explore electricity for the first time! I unscrewed the cover, which exposed the wiring, and I turned the light switch on. Nothing exciting happened so I decided, for some reason I cannot recall, to

touch the wires with my finger. It was then I discovered the power of electricity. The shock I received gave me a life-long respect for this invisible power. All I did was touch the wire, but once the contact was made I felt its power. This woman's hesitant faith was all that was needed to receive the healing power of the Son of God and she was liberated from the disease which had afflicted her for so many years.

But the story does not stop there: "And Jesus, immediately knowing in Himself that power had gone out of him, turned around in the crowd and said, 'Who touched my clothes?'" (Mark 5:30) The woman, who appeared to want to remain anonymous, came forward. She was a shy person and this cost her a lot but she explained what she had done: "But the woman, fearing and trembling, knowing what had happened to her, came and fell down before Him and told Him the whole truth. And He said to her, 'Daughter, your faith has made you well. Go in peace, and be healed of your affliction.'" (Mark 5:33-34)

The story underscores how faith liberates us from the most distressing circumstances and empowers us to be witnesses to God's grace. The storm is a picture of how we can be liberated from fear. Legion is an illustration of how we can be liberated from evil influences. The woman is a picture of how we can be freed from confining circumstances. Now the story of Jairus demonstrates how we can be freed from impossible circumstances.

After the woman was healed some people came from Jairus' house to explain that his daughter was dead and Jesus was too late to help. On hearing the news, Jesus said to Jairus, "Do not be afraid; only believe."

In the first story we looked at Jesus immediately calmed the storm. He had the power to heal Jairus' daughter immediately. He did not need to be in or near the house. But Jesus does something Jairus would always remember: He walked with him on that apparently hopeless journey to where the young girl lay lifeless in order to free her from death itself. God not only frees us from the consequences of sin but He is with us as we experience the pain of such circumstances. When Jesus arrives at the house of Jairus, He sends everyone away other than the girl's parents and His close disciples before gently restoring the child to life (Mark 5:41-43): "Then He took the child by the hand, and said to her, 'Talitha, cumi,' which is translated, 'Little girl, I say to you, arise.' Immediately the girl arose and walked, for she was twelve years of age. And they were overcome with great amazement. But He commanded them strictly that no one should know it, and said that something should be given her to eat."

There are three records in the Gospels of people that Jesus raised from the dead. In order of appearance they are: Jairus' daughter in Mark 5:21-43, the son of the widow of Nain in Luke 7:11-17, and Lazarus in John 11:38-44. In the first, the young girl is set free from death and has a new appetite - a picture of desire for the word of God. The son of the widow is restored to life to enjoy a new relationship - a picture of the family of God. Lazarus loosed from his graves clothes to enjoy a new life - a picture of service to God.

However, no matter how great these miracles were they could not free the human race from its slavery to sin. To do this the Son of God had Himself to become a prisoner. He submitted Himself to those who arrested, tried, judged and crucified Him. In John 8:34 Jesus says, "Most assuredly, I say to you, whoever commits sin is a slave of sin." Then He adds in John 8:36, "if the Son makes you free, you shall be free indeed." The cost of this freedom was the life of Christ and its power is the resurrected Christ.

When the Gospel began to be preached, the same liberating power of Christ is in evidence. This is demonstrated in Acts 16 when Paul, guided by the Spirit of God, arrives in Philippi to begin communicating the Gospel. First God opens the heart of Lydia: "And on the Sabbath day we went out of the city to the riverside, where prayer was customarily made; and we sat down and spoke to the women who met there. Now a certain woman named Lydia heard us. She was a seller of purple from the city of Thyatira, who worshipped God. The Lord opened her heart to heed the things spoken by Paul. And when she and her household were baptized, she begged us, saying, 'If you have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come to my house and stay.' So she persuaded us" (Acts 16:13-15).

Following this small beginning, Paul and Silas remained in Philippi prayed each day for God's blessing and direction in their work in the Gospel. As they went to pray a slave girl confronted them: "Now it happened, as we went to prayer, that a certain slave girl possessed with a spirit of divination met us, who brought her masters much profit by fortune-telling. This girl followed Paul and us, and cried out, saying, 'These men are the servants of the Most High God, who proclaim to us the way of salvation.' And this she did for many days. But Paul, greatly annoyed, turned and said to the spirit, 'I command you in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her.' And he came out that very hour. But when her masters saw that their hope of profit was gone, they seized Paul and Silas and dragged them into the marketplace to the authorities" (Acts 16:16-19).

Paul and Silas had been faithfully preaching Christ and as a result Lydia and the slave, both very different people, were brought to Christ. But now Paul and Silas become prisoners because they had set others free (Acts 16:22-24): "Then the multitude rose up together against them; and the magistrates tore off their clothes and commanded them to be beaten with rods. And when they had laid many stripes on them, they threw them into prison, commanding the

jailer to keep them securely. Having received such a charge, he put them into the inner prison and fastened their feet in the stocks.”

What follows is one of clearest examples of the transforming and liberating power of Christian Gospel. Becoming prisoners did not restrict Paul and Silas’ service in the Gospel; instead it becomes the means of even greater blessing. As Paul and Silas prayed and sang hymns, the prisoners listened and God intervened. There was a great earthquake which shook the foundations of the prison, opened all the doors and released everyone’s chains. (Acts 16:26) It seems that God sent that earthquake to open the heart of the jailor: “And the keeper of the prison, awaking from sleep and seeing the prison doors open, supposing the prisoners had fled, drew his sword and was about to kill himself. But Paul called with a loud voice, saying, ‘Do yourself no harm, for we are all here.’ Then he called for a light, ran in, and fell down trembling before Paul and Silas. And he brought them out and said, ‘Sirs, what must I do to be saved?’ So they said, ‘Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved, you and your household.’ Then they spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all who were in his house. And he took them the same hour of the night and washed their stripes. And immediately he and all his family were baptized. Now when he had brought them into his house, he set food before them; and he rejoiced, having believed in God with all his household” (Acts 16:27-34).

This remarkable conversion demonstrated the power of God to set free the hardest heart and transform the jailer into the gentlest of men. This fundamental belief in the Gospel of Christ has led Christians through the ages to endure hardship and poverty to bring the love of God to those in greatest need. It has empowered them to set people free from fear, evil, danger and even death and bring them into the liberty of the love of God. This was the conviction of missionaries who went into the most difficult and inhospitable parts of world with the Gospel. It led men like Charles and John Wesley to challenge an unstable society; William Wilberforce to confront slavery; Lord Shaftesbury, William Booth, Thomas Barnardo and George Müller to address poverty and homelessness; and Elizabeth Fry to address appalling conditions in Victorian prisons. It also led countless unknown followers of Christ to follow their Master and to go about doing good. Today, medical centres, schools, orphanages and shelters are still funded and resourced by Christians who have personally experienced the liberating power of the love of God and who seek to do what they can share that same love with their fellows and defend those liberties.

Let us defend the liberty we enjoy as Christians by demonstrating in the words of Augustine that, “Man is most free when controlled by God alone.”

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