

THY FREE SPIRIT
Alexander Maclaren

*"The law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus
has made me free from the law of sin and death."
Romans 8:2*

We have to distinguish two meanings of law. In the stricter sense, it signifies the authoritative expressions of the will of a ruler proposed for the obedience of man. In the wider, almost figurative sense, it means nothing more than the generalized expression of constant similar facts. For instance, objects attract one another in certain circumstances with a force which in the same circumstances is always the same. When that fact is stated generally, we get the law of gravity. Thus the word comes to mean little more than a regular process. In our text the word is used in a sense much nearer the latter than the former of these two. 'The law of sin and of death' cannot mean a series of commandments; it certainly does not mean the Mosaic law. It must either be entirely figurative, taking sin and death as two great tyrants who domineer over men; or it must mean the continuous action of these powers, the process by which they work. These two come substantially to the same idea. The law of sin and of death describes a certain constancy of operation, uniform and fixed, under the dominion of which men are struggling. But there is another constancy of operation, uniform and fixed too, a mighty antagonistic power which frees from the dominion of the former: it is 'the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus.'

1. The bondage.

The Apostle is speaking about himself as he was, and we have our own consciousness to verify his transcript of his own personal experience. Paul had found that by an inexorable iron sequence, sin worked in himself the true death of the soul--in separation from God, in the extinction of good and noble capacities, in the atrophying of all that was best in himself, in the death of joy and peace. And this iron sequence he, with an eloquent paradox, calls a 'law,' though its very characteristic is that it is lawless transgression of the true law of humanity. He so describes it, partly, because he would place emphasis on its dominion over us. Sin rules with iron sway; men madly obey it, and even when they think themselves free, are under a bitter tyranny. Further, he desires to emphasize the fact that sin and death are parts of one process which operates constantly and uniformly. This dark anarchy and wild chaos of disobedience and transgression has its laws. All happens there according to rule. Rigid and inevitable as the courses of the stars, or the fall of the leaf from the tree, is sin hurrying on to its natural goal in death. In this fatal dance, sin leads in death; the one fair-spoken and full of dazzling promises, the other in the end throws off the mask and slays. It is true of all who listen to the tempting voice, and the deluded victim 'knows not that the dead are there, and that her guests are in the depth of hell.'

2. The method of deliverance.

The previous chapter sounded the depths of human impotence and showed the tragic impossibility of human effort to strip off the poisoned garment. Here the Apostle tells the wonderful story of how he himself was delivered, in the full rejoicing confidence that what availed for his emancipation would equally avail for every captive soul. Because he himself has experienced a divine power which breaks the dreadful sequence of sin and of death, he knows that every soul may share in the experience. No mere outward means will be sufficient to emancipate a spirit; no merely intellectual methods will avail to set free the passions and desires which have been captured by sin. It is vain to seek deliverance from a perverted will by any re-publication, however emphatic, of a law of duty. Nothing can touch the necessities of the case but a gift of power which becomes an abiding influence in us, and develops a mightier energy to overcome the evil tendencies of a sinful soul.

That communicated power must impart life. Nothing short of a Spirit of life, quick and powerful with an immortal and intense energy, will avail to meet the need. Such a Spirit must give the life which it possesses, must quicken and bring into action dormant powers in the spirit that it would free. It must implant new energies and directions, new motives, desires, tastes, and tendencies. It must bring into play mightier attractions to neutralize and deaden existing ones (as when to some chemical compound a substance is added which has a stronger affinity for one of the elements, [and] a new thing is made).

Paul's experience, which he had a right to cast into general terms and potentially to extend to all mankind, had taught him that such a new life for such a spirit had come to him by union with Jesus Christ. Such a union, deep and mystical as it is, is, thank God, an experience universal in all true Christians, and constitutes the very heart of the Gospel which Paul rejoiced to believe was entrusted to his hands for the world. His great message of 'Christ in us' has been woefully curtailed and mangled when his other message of 'Christ for us' has been taken, as it too often has been, to be the whole of his Gospel. They who take either of these inseparable elements to be the whole rend into two imperfect halves the perfect oneness of the Gospel of Christ.

We are often told that Paul was the true author of Christian doctrine, and are bidden to go back from him to Jesus. If we do so, we hear His grave sweet voice uttering in the upper-room the deep words, 'I am the Vine, ye are the branches.' And surely Paul is but repeating, without metaphor, what Christ once for all set forth in that lovely emblem, when he says that 'the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus made me free from the law of sin and of death.' The branches in their multitude make the Vine in its unity, and the sap which rises from the deep root through the brown stem passes to every tremulous leaf, and brings bloom and savor into every cluster. Jesus drew His emblem from the noblest form of vegetative life. Paul, in other places, draws his from the highest form of bodily life when he points to the many members in one body and the Head which governs all, and says, 'So also is Christ.' In another place he points to the noblest form of earthly love and unity. The blessed fellowship and sacred oneness of husband and wife are an emblem sweet, though inadequate, of the fellowship in love and unity of spirit between Christ and His Church.

And all this mysterious oneness of life has an intensely practical side. In Jesus, and by union with Him, we receive a power that delivers from sin and arrests the stealthy progress of sin's follower, death. Love to Him, the result of fellowship with Him, and the consequence of life received from Him becomes the motive which makes the redeemed heart delight to do His will and takes all the power out of every temptation. We are in Him, and He in us, on condition and by means of our humble faith; and because my faith thus knits me to Him, it is 'the victory that overcomes the world' and breaks the chains of many sins. So this communion with Jesus Christ is the way by which we shall increase that triumphant spiritual life, which is the only victorious antagonist of the else [otherwise] inevitable consequence which declares that the 'soul that sinneth it shall die,' and die even in sinning.

3. The process of deliverance.

Following the R.V. we read 'made me free,' not 'hath made me.' The reference is obviously, as the Greek more clearly shows, to a single historical event, which some would take to be the Apostle's baptism but which is more properly supposed to be his conversion. His strong bold language here does not mean that he claims to be sinless. The emancipation is effected, although it is but begun. He holds that at that moment when Jesus appeared to him on the road to Damascus and he yielded to Him as Lord, his deliverance was real, though not complete. He was conscious of a real change of position in reference to that law of sin and of death. Paul distinguishes between the true self and the accumulation of selfish and sensual habits which make up so much of ourselves. The deeper and purer self may be vitalized in

will and heart, and set free even while the emancipation is not worked out in the life. The parable of the leaven applies in the individual renewal; and there is no fanaticism and no harm in Paul's point of view if only it be remembered that sins, by which passion and externals overbear my better self, are mine in responsibility and in consequences. Thus guarded, we may be wholly right in thinking of all the evils which still cleave to the renewed Christian soul as not being part of it, but destined to drop away.

And this bold declaration is to be vindicated as a prophetic confidence in the supremacy and ultimate dominion of the new power which works even through much antagonism in an imperfect Christian. Paul, too, calls 'things that are not as though they were.' If my spirit of life is the 'Spirit of life in Christ,' it will go on to perfection. It is Spirit, therefore it is informing and conquering the material. It is a divine Spirit, therefore it is omnipotent. It is the Spirit of life, leading in and imparting life like itself, which is kindred with it and is its source. It is the Spirit of life in Christ, therefore leading to life like His, bringing us to conformity with Him because the same causes produce the same effects. It is a life in Christ having a law and regular orderly course of development. So, just as when we have the germ we may hope for fruit, and when we can see the infantile oak in the tightly-shut acorn or see in the egg the creature which shall afterwards grow there, we have in this gift of the Spirit the victory. If we have the cause we have the effects implicitly folded in it, and we have but to wait further development.

The Christian life is to be one long effort, partial, and gradual, to unfold the freedom possessed. Paul knew full well that his emancipation was not perfect. It was, probably, after this triumphant expression of confidence that he wrote, 'Not as though I had already attained, either were already perfect.' The first stage is the gift of power; the appropriation and development of that power is the work of a life, and it ought to pass through a well-marked series and cycle of growing changes. The way to develop it is by constant application to the source of all freedom, the life-giving Spirit, and by constant effort to conquer sins and temptations. There is no such thing in the Christian conflict as a painless development. We must mortify the deeds of the body if we are to live in the Spirit. The Christian progress has in it the nature of a crucifixion. It is to be effort, steadily directed for the sake of Christ and in the joy of His Spirit, to destroy sin and to win practical holiness. Homely moralities are the outcome and the text of all pretensions to spiritual communion.

We are, further, to perfect holiness in the fear of the Lord by 'waiting for the Redemption,' which is not merely passive waiting but active expectation, as of one who stretches out a welcoming hand to an approaching friend. Nor must we forget that this accomplished deliverance is but partial while upon earth. 'The body is dead because of sin, but the spirit is life because of righteousness.' But there may be indefinite approximation to complete deliverance. The metaphors in Scripture under which Christian progress is described--whether drawn from a conflict or a race, or from a building, or from the growth of a tree--all suggest the idea of constant advance against hindrances, which, constant though it is, does not reach the goal here. And this is our noblest earthly condition--not to be pure, but to be tending towards it and conscious of impurity. Hence our tempers should be those of humility, strenuous effort, firm hope. We are as slaves who have escaped but are still in the wilderness, with the enemies' dogs baying at our feet. But we shall come to the land of freedom on whose sacred soil sin and death can never tread.