

EMANCIPATED SLAVES **Alexander Maclaren**

*"I am Yahweh your God, which brought you forth out of the land of Egypt, that ye should not be their bondmen; and I have broken the bands of your yoke, and made you go upright."
(Leviticus 26:13)*

The history of Israel is a parable and a prophecy as well as a history. The great central word of the New Testament has been drawn from it, viz. 'redemption,' *i.e.* a buying out of bondage.

The Hebrew slaves in Egypt were 'delivered.' The deliverance made them a nation. God acquired them for Himself, and they became His servants. The great truths of the gospel are all there. Henceforth the fact of their deliverance became the basis of all His appeals to them; the ground of His law; the reason for their obedience. In the previous context it has shaped the institution of slavery. Here it is the foundation of a general exhortation to obedience. The emphatic picture of the men stooping beneath the yoke, and then straightening themselves up, erect, illustrate the joyful freedom which Christ gives. That freedom is our subject.

1. Jesus gives freedom from the slavery of sin.

Freedom consists in power to follow unhindered the law of our being. So sin is slavery because it is contrary to that law. When Jesus promised freedom through the truth, the Jews indignantly spurned the offer with the proud boast, which the presence of a Roman garrison in Jerusalem should have made to stick in their throats, 'We were never in bondage to any man.' A like hardy shutting of eyes to plain facts characterizes the attitude of multitudes to the Christian view of man's condition. Jesus answered the Jews by the deep saying, 'He that commits sin is the servant of sin.' A man fancies himself showing off his freedom by throwing off the restraints of morality or law, and by 'doing as he likes,' but he is really showing his servitude. Self-will looks like liberty, but it is serfdom. The libertine is a slave. That slavery under sin takes two forms. The man who sins is a slave to the power of sin. Will and conscience are meant to guide and impel us, and we never sin without first coercing or silencing them and subjecting them to the upstart tyranny of desires and senses which should obey and not command. The 'beggars' are on horseback, and the 'princes' walking. There is a servile revolt, and we know what horrors accompany that.

But slavery under sin is shown also by the terrible force with which any sin, if once committed, appeals to the doer to repeat it. It is not only in regard to sensual sins that the awful insistence of habit grips the doer and makes it the rarest thing that evil once done is done only once.

But he who sins is also a slave to the guilt of sin. True, that sense of guilt is for the most part and in most men dormant; but the snake is but hibernating, and often wakes and stings at most unexpected moments. 'The deceitfulness of sin' lies to the sinner, so that for the most part he 'wipes his mouth, saying I have done no harm.' But some chance incident may at any time, and certainly something will at some time, dissipate the illusion as a stray sunbeam might scatter a wisp of mist and show started eyes the grim face that had always been there. And even while not consciously felt, guilt hampers the soul's insight into divine realities, clips its wings so that it cannot soar, paralyzes its efforts after noble aims, and inclines it to ignoble groveling as far away from thoughts of God and goodness as may be.

Christ makes the man, bound and tied by the cords of his sins, lift himself up and stand erect. By His death He brings forgiveness which removes guilt and the consciousness of it. By His inbreathed life He gives a new nature akin to His own, and brings into force a new motive, even transforming love, which is stronger than the death with which sin has cursed its doers.

'The law of the Spirit of Life in Christ Jesus has made me free from the law of sin and death.'

2. Jesus gives freedom from a slavish relation to God.

Apart from Him, God, if recognized at all, is for the most part thought of as 'austere, reaping where He did not sow,' and His commandments as grievous. Men may sullenly recognize that they cannot resist, but they do not submit. They may obey in act, but there is no obedience in their wills nor any cheerfulness in their hearts. The elder brother in the parable could say, 'Neither transgressed I at any time thy commandment,' but his service had been joyless, and he never remembered having received gifts that made him 'merry with his friends.'

But from all such slavish and therefore worthless obedience, and all such reluctant and therefore unreal submission, Jesus liberates those who believe on Him and abide in His word. He declares God as our loving Father, and through Him we have authority to become sons of God. He 'sends forth the Spirit of His Son into our hearts,' and that makes us to be no more slaves but sons. Sullen obedience becomes glad choice, and it is the inmost desire and the deepest delight of the loving child to do always the things that please the loving Father. 'I ought' and 'I will' coalesce, and so there is no slavery, but perfect freedom, in recognizing and bowing to the great 'I must' which sweetly rules the life.

3. Christ gives deliverance from servility to men.

We need not touch on the historical connection, plain as that is, between modern conceptions of individual freedom and the influence of Christ's teaching. Modern democracy is rooted in Christ, though it is often unaware of its genesis, and blindly attacks the force to which it owes its existence.

Because all men [without distinction] are redeemed by Christ, because by that redemption all stand in the same relation to Him, because all have equal access to Him, and are taught and guided by His Spirit, because 'we must all appear before the judgment-seat of Christ,' therefore class prerogatives and subject classes fade away, and there is 'neither bond nor free,' but 'all are one in Christ Jesus.'

But there are other ways in which men tyrannize over men and in which Christ's redemption sets us free. There is the undue authority of favorite teachers and examples. There is the tyranny of public opinion. There is undue regard to human approbation. There is the sway of priestcraft. How does Christianity deliver from these? It makes Christ's law our unconditional duty. It makes His approbation our highest joy. It gives legitimate scope to the instinct of loyalty, submission, and imitation, and of subjection to authority. It reduces to insignificance men's judgment, and all their loud voices to a babble of nothings. 'With me it is a very small matter to be judged of man's judgment.' It brings the soul into direct communion with God and sweeps away all intermediaries. 'Not for that we have dominion over your faith but are helpers of your joy; for by faith ye stand.' So personal independence and individuality of character are the result of Christianity. 'I have made you go upright.'

4. Christ gives us freedom from the power of circumstances.

Most men are made by these. (We need not here enter on questions of the influence of their environment on all men's development.) But Christ gives us: (a) A great aim for our lives high above these. (b) A foothold in Him outside of them. We are not the slaves of our circumstances but their masters. (c) The power to utilize them.

So Christians are 'free' in all senses of the word. The great Act of Emancipation has been passed for us all. Only Christ has rule over us, and we have our perfect freedom in His service. We have been sitting in the prison-house, and He has come and declared 'The Spirit

of the Lord is upon Me to proclaim liberty to the captives.'