

Freedom, Through Christ: Free in Christ

by Daniel Steele

Real freedom is the gift of Christ, where the human will is completely enthralled by the Divine will, and is the result of the crucifixion of self and the full inspiration of the Christ-life.

Topics: "Christian Freedom", "Sanctification"

Description

Daniel Steele preaches about the desire for true freedom in worshipping God, emphasizing the distinction between formal freedom (free agency) and real freedom (unrestrained acting out of one's nature in harmony with God). He delves into the philosophical view of these freedoms, highlighting the necessity of eradicating sin for real freedom to be realized. Steele discusses the transition from formal to real freedom through perfect love and surrender to God, leading to a life of spontaneous service and obedience. He explores the concept of service without servility, where true freedom is found in complete submission to God's will, resulting in perfect liberty and bondage to Christ's love.

Transcript

"O for freedom, for freedom in worshipping God,
For the mountain-top feeling of generous souls,
For the health, for the air, of the hearts deep and broad,
Where grace not in rills, but in cataracts, rolls!"

WHAT is the object of Faber's intense desire, breathed out in these words? Not what we call religious liberty, the right to worship according to the dictates of conscience enlightened by the private interpretation of the Holy Scriptures. In ages for ever gone by, men wandered in exile, pined in dungeons, burned at the stake, or swung from gibbets, in the exercise of a right which Christian legislation has in modern times secured to the people of nearly all lands.

Nor does this eminent poet of the higher Christian life aspire after the liberty so much discussed by a past generation of theologians, the freedom of the will in its moral choices, the indispensable basis of accountability, called by the Germans formal freedom, in contrast with that real freedom for which this modern psalmist of the inward life longed so ardently. This real freedom is not a mere poetic fancy, an angel flitting on airy pinions before the inspired bard's eye, but never deigning to light on the earth and dwell in the abodes of men. Though men generally who assert that real freedom is not a citizen of this

lower world, and that the fetters of doubt and fear and sin must gall every soul so long as it is in a mortal body, yet a few have actually received this heavenly visitant into their earthly habitation, and for years have communed with her in fellowship unspeakable blissful. These are not a favored few, capriciously selected for this great honor and greater joy. For on intimate acquaintance our celestial Guest is found to be cherishing no exclusive tastes and no personal preferences. We find that the design of formal freedom is to lead the entire human family to real freedom. Her failure in the case of multitudes must be charged to their stubbornness, and not to her partiality.

Let us now take a philosophical view of these two kinds of freedom. Formal freedom, or free agency, is the power of choice between sin and holiness. The human will must have sufficient independency to originate sin, or it follows that it flows from the Divine causality. For sin in this world is the result of some cause. Deny that the human will is a cause uncaused in its volitions, and you are left with this dreadful alternative, God is the author of sin.

But real freedom is the unrestrained acting out of one's own nature. Let children play together, and the girls take to dolls, and the boys to stilts, by a kind of inner necessity coiled up like a watch-spring in their natures, prompting them to act out these inherent oppositions and peculiarities of sex. When they thus act they are really free. Require them to change their parts and act contrary to nature, and real freedom is destroyed. The great poet, painter, or sculptor is so conscious that he is pervaded by a silent necessity of nature, called genius, that, looking back from the summit of his achievements, he feels that he could not have done otherwise.

"But," says a fatalist, "could not Nero have set up the same plea for his crimes? Did not he simply act out his depraved nature? And did he not inherit that nature from his wicked mother, Agrippina?" Two considerations make Nero's wicked deeds different from Michel Angelo's innocent spontaneties. Nero, though acting out a bad nature was conscious of formal freedom, -- the power to put forth virtuous acts. Secondly, if he had listened to the preaching of Paul, his prisoner, he would have found out that there is present to every depraved soul a power to change character itself from depravity to holiness. That moral act is really free which expresses unconstrained the moral condition of the agent, whatever it may be. Nero had so hardened his heart and seared his conscience that there was no inward hindrance to his monstrous crimes. He had real freedom in sinning. But he might have believed in Jesus Christ so perfectly as to be emancipated from the dominion, yea, the existence, of every native, depraved impulse, so that acts of holiness would have flowed freely and spontaneously from his will. He might have had real freedom in righteousness. This is what Jesus means when He says, "If the Son, therefore, shall make you free, ye shall be FREE INDEED."

An inspection of the ordinary sinner's moral state reveals a collision of inward forces, a sense of obligation to the moral law, involving a consciousness of freedom to obey, and a drift of nature in the opposite direction, toward sin. Hence the moral phenomenon in the seventh of Romans. Real freedom can be realized by the complete annihilation of one of these forces. Erase the feeling of moral obligation, and you have an extraordinary sinner who has passed beyond the limit of hope. Eradicate the inherent tendency to depravity, by perfecting the love of God within, and you have a real freeman in Christ Jesus. Hence, the inference is irresistible, that sin, the cause of inward strife and conflict, cannot belong to the true nature of man, and that the entire exclusion of sin is necessary to that spontaneous and unimpeded action of his will which is called real freedom. Entire sanctification is identical with perfect liberty.

"And He hath breathed into my soul

A special love of Thee,
A love to lose my will in His,
And by that loss be FREE."

Thomas á Kempis agrees with Faber when he says, "My son, thou canst not have perfect liberty unless thou wholly renounces thyself. They are but in fetters, all who merely seek their own interest and are lovers of themselves. Keep this short and complete saying: 'Forsake all, and thou shalt find all. Leave concupiscence and thou shalt find rest.'"

Formal freedom is an inherent attribute of man, but real freedom is the gift of Christ, inasmuch as it is the outflow of the new nature, the creation of the Holy Ghost. "Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty." It is obedience from an inner impulse, spontaneous and free. It is a perfect similarity of feeling with God in all our moral choices and in all sources of our delight. It is not a freedom from the law as a rule of life, (antinomianism), but as the ground of justification and the impulse to serve. We keep the law unconsciously, not from dread of its penalties, but from love to the Lawgiver, by a glad assent, as naturally as water runs downhill. In fact, the soul saved to the uttermost, and filled with the Sanctifier, like the body of the risen Jesus, has lost its earthward attraction, and gravitates upward, having passed the centre of gravity between sin and holiness, earth and heaven, Col. iii. 1-3: -- "If ye then be risen with Christ seek those things which are above, where Christ sitteth on the right hand of God. Set your affections on things above, and not on things on the earth. For ye are dead, and your life is hid with Christ in God."

Here we encounter the objection, that the formal freedom of such a soul must have ceased, being merged in the real freedom which it has attained. It must be admitted that these two seem to destroy each other, so that when real freedom belongs to a man formal freedom must be denied to him. The Scriptures seem to teach the same doctrine. "Whomsoever is born of God doth not commit sin: for his seed remaineth in him, and he cannot sin, because he is born of God" (I John iii. 9). This seems to teach that the soul once born of God has lost its freedom to sin, and passed beyond the perils of probation. A careful reading of this text, attending to the tenses, affords much light. Whosoever has been born of God and so continues (perfect tense) is not sinning; for his seed (the new principle of love to God) is remaining in him, and he is not able to be sinning, (present tense indicating a state, not an act), because he has been born of God and so remains. The incompatibility of the two states, of permanent sonship and habitual sinning, is here denied, and not the impossibility of a loss of sonship by a lapse into sin. So long as the soul fully cleaves unto God it incapacitates itself for sinning. Nevertheless, formal freedom still underlies this real freedom of a holy soul, and it may, at any time, while in probation, come to the surface in an evil choice, if faith should relax its hold on God, as in the case of the angels who fell from their first or probationary estate, and of Adam and Eve, who fell from their innocence. Why such beings should sin in an insolvable mystery; but really it is no greater than the mystery of sin going on around us today. Sin is unreason. To give a good reason for it is to justify it.

The highest estate we can reach in probation is the posse non peccare, ability not to sin. In the state of the just made perfect we shall attain the non posse peccare, inability to sin, real taking the place of formal freedom. On the other hand, every impenitent sinner, by steadily diminishing his moral capacity to resist sin, is approaching that awful state of final permanence of sinful character, non posse non peccare, inability to abstain from sinning, his formal freedom being engulfed in a real and eternal enslavement of the will to sin, in which he has real freedom to sin and not from sin. The glorified saint has real freedom

from sin and not to sin. Both are still conceptually free agents, responsible for their acts.

It is a noteworthy fact that the terms free, freeman, and liberty, in the New Testament have no reference at all to formal freedom, or free agency, but solely to the real freedom bestowed by the Lion of Judah when, through entire sanctification, he breaks every chain. This is the only liberty worth mention in the estimation of the Holy Spirit. All who possess only formal freedom are the bondsmen of sin tyrannizing over them. This renders them accountable to God, and if properly used, is the stepping-stones to freedom in Christ.

Another instructive fact disclosed in the study of this subject is, that real freedom is often expressed as the most complete enslavement to God. This indicates that freedom from sin is at the same time perfect submission to God. Hence the evangelical paradox in I Cor. vii. 22, where the Lord's freeman is Christ's servant, and in I Peter ii. 16, where the free are exhorted to use their liberty as the servants or slaves of God. Thus the highest freedom is the most perfect bondage. The loftiest ideal of liberty is realized when the human will is completely enthralled by the Divine will. Amid these apparent contradictions is the wrestling ground of faith. Thanks be unto God, "we who have believed do enter into rest," the glorious rest of a perfect freedom from doubt and worry, and fear and sin, actual and original.

It is the concurrent testimony of all advanced believers, that they have passed the point where Christian duties are performed as a task, and have emerged into the region where service is spontaneous and unconstrained. This point is identical with the experience of perfect love. Up to that hour there is a consciousness of what the German theologians call formal freedom; but after that glorious event there is an experience of real freedom. The difference between these is, that in the former there is an absence of all outward coercion; in the latter, the last vestige of constraint from within ourselves, from the resistance or inertia of self, has disappeared, and our will is in delightful harmony with the will of God.

This transition can never be reached on the plane of nature. As an eagle cannot out-soar the atmosphere, so self-will cannot transcend itself. The work is divine. This our adorable Saviour plainly declares when He says: "If the Son therefore shall make you free, ye shall be free indeed." This perfect freedom is rarely, if ever, experienced at first espousal to Christ. There is not a complete emancipation from the constraint of the law, which is our paidagogos, or child-leader, to bring us to Christ.

Fear mingles with love -- servile or tormenting fear. The timid soul clings to the rough hand of the child-leader for protection, even after he has come to the crucified Christ. In other words, there is more or less legalism in His service. The critics tell us that the marginal reading of Rom. vii. 6, has by far the best manuscript authority: "But now we have been delivered from the law, having died to that wherein we were held, so that we serve in the newness of the Spirit, and not in the oldness of the letter."

This death of the believer unto the law must be twofold: first, as the ground of acceptance by reason of his perfect obedience. The penitent sinner in this sense dies to the law when he abandons the plea of perfect obedience, and relies only on the blood of Christ, and obtains justification by faith. A second step brings him into perfect freedom. This is when love toward the Lawgiver is so fully shed abroad in the heart as to effect a perfect release from the fear of the law as a motive to obedience.

This takes place when the Holy Spirit fills the soul, and exhibits Jesus to the eye of faith as "the One altogether lovely," and gives an assurance of His love to me so strong as to exclude doubt, and to awaken love toward Him responsive to His mighty love. Duty is transformed into delight. Prayer, praise, confession, and sacrifice, are now spontaneous. Love knows no burden in the service of its object. The law still remains as the rule of life and the measure of sin, but it is divested of its terrors.

"Who is He that condemneth?" It is Christ that died, yea, rather that is risen again, who is even at the right hand of God, who also maketh intercession for us." Thus in justification the believer's emancipation from the law is initiated; in entire sanctification and in the fullness of love it is completed.

Service without servility is beautiful illustrated by the Levitical law relating to the release of the Hebrew servant on the seventh year. Exodus xxi. 2-6; If, through love to his master, or to his own wife and children, he refused to go out free, his ear was to be attached to the door-post by means of an awl, symbolizing the fact that henceforth that slave was a fixture -- a part of his master's real estate, as much as the tiles nailed to his roof. But what about the service after this ceremony? Was it hesitating, irksome, or constrained? Only consider that he is a slave for ever! Is this alone enough to darken all his skies and becloud all his prospects! Who can cheerfully abide the thought of living and dying in bondage? Every one who has discovered the precious secret to God is the highest style of freedom. The ear-bored servant, then, illustrates the highest liberty of which man is capable. Hence in Psalm xl. 8, the Messiah is personified as saying, "I delight to do Thy will, O my God! yea, Thy law is within my heart." But the figure which sets forth the perfection of His obedience in a most striking manner is in this words, "Mine ears hast Thou opened" -- digged or bored: I am fettered by the willing bond of love. God's will was His choice.

"This was the end, the blessed rule,

Of Jesus' toils and tears;

This was the passion of His heart,

Those three and thirty years."

This explains the seeming contradiction in Psalm cxvi. 16: "O, Lord, truly I am Thy servant (or slave); Thou hast loosened my bonds." The number of those who understand this blessed paradox is daily increasing. The identity of the highest freedom with the most unreserved surrender of self to God is their blissful experience. When "the sweet will of God" is the taskmaster of a soul brimful of love to Jesus, the exultant believer can warble this grateful song to the divine will: --

"And He hath breathed into my heart

A special love for thee;

A love to lose my will in His,

And by that loss be free."

The true doctrine of the final perseverance of the saints is wrapped up in this idea. It is not founded on the Creator's act of unconditional election from eternity, but upon the joint election of the creature and his Creator; on the ground of service and character foreseen and approved by God, and His everlasting dominion deliberately chosen by man. "Elect according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, through sanctification of the spirit, unto obedience and sprinkling of the blood of Jesus Christ." Then he becomes an ear-bored servant. He has passed the point of equal attraction between self and God, and now and for evermore gravitates upward. To him, and him alone, belongs this confident challenge, "Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?"

"But this I do find,

We two are so joined,
He'll not live in glory,
And leave me behind."

The crucifixion of self and the full inspiration of the Christ-life have laid a blessed paralysis upon the centrifugal tendencies of the soul.

"Now rest, my long-divided heart;
Fixed on this blissful centre, rest."

Charles Wesley in many of his hymns has expressed the same thought, not as a mere poetic fancy, but as a glorious experimental reality: --

"Jesus, Thine all victorious love
Shed in my heart abroad;
Then shall my feet no longer rove,
Rooted and fixed in God."

Still stronger is the couplet beginning the last stanza of this hymn: --

"My steadfast soul, from falling free,
Shall then no longer move."

But in his "Wrestling Jacob," that life-like portrait of a struggling, and victorious soul, the same truth appears in still stronger terms: --

"Nor have I power from Thee to move,
Thy nature and Thy name is Love."

Such a soul has occasion for watchfulness to know the Master's will, to penetrate the celestial guise in which Satan sometimes appears, and to guard all the innocent sensibilities against excessive action. While all the forces of St. Paul's soul, fused by the fire of love, were flowing Christward in one molten stream, he kept under his body, lest he should be a castaway. In this respect he counted not himself as already perfect, but he was pressing forward, if by any means he "might attain unto the resurrection of the dead." But in joyful service, without the least trace of servile feeling, in the fullness of his love toward Christ excluding all antagonistic forces, he says, "Let us, as many as be perfect, be thus minded" (Phil. iii. 8-21).

Service without servility constitutes the peculiar and glorious feature of the new covenant. The old covenant was an outside, coercive force, a law written in stone; the new covenant is written on the heart, rectifying and inspiring all the springs of action. See Heb. viii. 8-12, where, instead of the external obligation entailing bondage to the letter, will be found the new motive to obedience, the inward power of a divinely implanted knowledge of God's will, and perfect delight therein, forming a new and blissful bond

between the Lord and his people.

In the great problem of Lenity and Law which is solved by the atonement, Law is not set aside or cheated out of its demands. Christ came not to destroy, but to fulfill, the moral law. He not only magnified it by His expiatory sacrifice; but by the Holy Spirit He transfers it from the table of stone to the table of the heart, putting it inside the will, so that it is no longer a yoke upon the neck, but a free, spontaneous, and delightful choice. When God fulfills the promise of the new covenant, "I will put my law in your heart," the emancipated child of God can then joyfully appropriate the words of the Son of God, "Lo, I come to do Thy will, O God." When the Law is thus incorporated in us we unconsciously keep its precepts.

This Scripture abundantly proves that this blessing is not limited to a privileged few, but is attainable by all believers, "from the least unto the greatest." The same truth is expressed by St. Paul when he says: "Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty." And only there. Yet this very apostle, who was evidently filled with the Spirit, and consequently lived in the atmosphere of real soul freedom, in every epistle styles himself as his highest title, "the doulos, or slave, of Christ Jesus."

How beautifully and concisely does St. James state the doctrine of this article in five words, "the perfect law of liberty;" the term "law" implying rightful authority and "liberty" implying an obedience spontaneous and free, while the term "perfect" expresses the infinite superiority of the New Testament to the Old, inasmuch as the Old rested on the law with foregleams of the promise, and the New records the glorious fulfillment, the jubilee of liberty regulated by the law of love.

What a change would the Church present, should this feature of the new covenant become the universal experience of the members! All the general rules regulating the life, all the requirements of the Discipline respecting attendance upon the means of grace, would immediately become a dead letter, not through universal neglect, but by reason of an inward spirit of obedience diffused through the entire body of Christ. This is the aim of the so-called higher-life movement: not to engraft something new upon Christianity, but fully to inaugurate the new covenant in the hearts of professed Christians, inspiring to the willing service of God, not from the impulse of fear, but from the inspiration of love.

Greater than the liberation of thirty-eight million Russian serfs, and the emancipation of four million African slaves in America, is the work of striking the spiritual fetters from nominal Christendom, and lifting up the uncounted hosts of these groaning bondsmen to the condition of rejoicing freemen in Christ Jesus. To enforce the decree of emancipation in Russia the emperor appointed fifteen hundred extraordinary Justices of the Peace; and to effect the same purpose in the United States, many thousands of agents, civil and military, were employed. Is it anything strange that Jesus, the great emancipator, not content with the issue of His proclamation of release to all enthralled souls, should commission extraordinary agencies for the execution of His beneficent purpose? All hail, then, to every messenger that bears upon his tongue the glad evangel of a full salvation, and the welcome news of a service to Christ without servility, and with joy unspeakable and full of glory. It is not enough that the divine decree of emancipation is printed in the Bible, God's statue book; it must be heralded abroad by human tongues, exemplified in human lives, and enforced by the divine Spirit. Hence Charles Wesley sings: --

"The truth that makes us free indeed,

We cannot learn it from our creed,

The truth that sanctifies,

To bring us faith, returns from heaven,
And Father, Son, and Spirit given,
Conducts us to the skies."

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