

The Greatest Freedom

Freedom — since the fall of Adam and Eve, mankind has been fighting for it. William Wilberforce suffered under a great burden of responsibility to stop the slave trade in Britain; William Tyndale and the 'ordinary' people fought to have the Word of God in their language; black people have struggled for centuries for the freedom of racial equality; women fought for the freedom to vote, and today still fight for equality in the workplace. Of course, there are some 'freedoms' being fought for that have negative consequences, due to man's belief that those things will make him free, such as gay rights, abortion, and drug legalization among others. However, when real freedom is fought for, freedom that is based on God's values, it truly sets people free.

Man has a hunger for freedom because God originally made him a free being. When God created the universe and everything in it, He told Adam and Eve to have dominion over it. I remember the first time Stuart and I visited a YWAM base in the UK to find out more about how we could get involved in missions. We sat in the base director's office and asked him what we could do, and where we could go to serve. He swiveled round in his chair to a map of the world on the wall behind him, swept his hand over it in a gesture that took in the whole world, and said, "Well, the world is your oyster really!" Of course, what that really meant was that we could go anywhere and do anything. There were so many opportunities that it wasn't a case of trying to find something to do, but rather trying to choose something from so many options! There was that sense of largeness, of space, a world of possibilities.

Have you ever stood in a wide open space where you could see range after range of mountains going on into an endless beautiful horizon, or on a cliff top in front of the vastness of the ocean, the spray moistening your face, and gulls flying freely over the expanse? What a feeling of freedom! I used to do that when I was a child and growing teen before I was saved. In some ways I had already found the Creator revealing Himself in the beauty and splendour of his creation. I would raise my hands in the air and speak to the One I didn't really know yet, feeling an overwhelming sense of freedom. I still get that feeling today when I'm in wide open spaces.

When God put man and woman in the garden, it was like that. He set them in a large place, a wide space full of beauty, wonder and amazing discoveries, and in essence said, "This is all for you. Enjoy!" He did

not really give them much in the way of rules and instructions other than to tend, multiply and have dominion, and one clear instruction not to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. The rest is history of course, because they did eat of it, and the earth and the people on it are still experiencing the consequences of that decision today.

Since that time, man has been trying to get out from under the curse of that sin and recapture something of the freedom God originally gave him. And God knew it. He knew we had become slaves to the enemy, slaves to sin, and even slaves to ourselves and others. It wasn't His plan for us to live like that, so He sent Jesus to redeem us from that curse, paying for our freedom from sin and the curse with His own blood.

So if Jesus has paid for us to be free, why are we still living as if we are not free? "What are you talking about, Michelle? We're Christians now. We are free", you might say. Well, I'd like to suggest that while we have been set free from sin by Jesus, the church is still living way below the freedom that was bought by Jesus. In fact, I'd even like to suggest that in some ways, the world is living MORE free than the Christians.

I remember the day I believed in Jesus 21 years ago. Stuart took me to Kensington Temple in London to hear Reinhard Bonnke, the German evangelist to Africa. He spoke powerfully about how Jesus turns the 'minus' to 'plus' in our lives. I had a lot of minuses that needed changing to pluses, and I was radically saved that day, baptized in the Holy Spirit, received a vision, spoke in tongues, and gave the interpretation. I had only just learned what 'born again' meant! I had never experienced such freedom. My whole life changed. I began to understand the things in my life that were wrong, such as living with my boyfriend, and changed them bit by bit. God delivered me from the power of alcohol, nicotine and pornography. But life was not a list of dos and don'ts, it was a journey of joyful discovery into the greatest sense of freedom a person can ever know. Suddenly, the world opened up for me. Life took on hope and meaning. I felt so loved and so free that I would sing and dance as I walked the two miles to work each day, listening to praise and worship songs on my head set. I wanted to shout and tell the world!

Gradually, however, I began to realize that being a believer was about more than being free and full of

The Greatest Freedom

joy. The church, at least the part I was in, taught me other things. It taught me that leadership was male and that there were defined roles for men and women. It taught me that if I wanted to pray aloud, or sing a prophetic song in a church meeting, I must cover my head. It taught me that it was wrong for me to teach God's Word unless I was teaching it to women and children. It taught me words such as 'authority' and 'submission' more than it taught words like 'freedom', 'goodness' and 'grace'. It taught me to place limitations on myself in the name of 'humility' that hindered my personality, development and joy, and expectations on myself that I could never fulfill. In word, it taught me that I was free, and that there was nothing more I needed to do to please God. But in practice, I spent the next years of my life believing that God required an awful lot for me to be a 'good' Christian. And I really tried hard to be good, to fit in, to do what I was told, and to fulfill the requirements, but it never seemed to work. As a troubled girl from a broken home, who had already seen a lot of life, I could not understand some of the things I was told to do, or not do, by the church. They seemed so odd, so irrelevant to the freedom I had found in Christ, and to life itself, that I have to admit that I refused to do some of them at great personal risk!



Of course, now I realize why I struggled so much—because those things are men's traditions and nothing to do with the freedom and life given to us by Jesus.

As a missionary, I still sometimes see people trying to place limitations and expectations on me, and my family. I can almost see the standard they have created in their own mind as they speak, about what I am, what I can do, and what I can have. We once had a leader visit us at our home. We owned two dogs and a cat, one of our dogs being a beautiful collie. Our whole family had gone without Christmas presents that year to get it and it was a real answer to a personal prayer. During this person's stay in our home, he asked if we were going to get any more animals. He told us that he felt owning more animals would be indulgent and therefore felt we shouldn't have any more!

In the world, however, you could have as many dogs, cats, or pigs as you wanted, and nobody would say 'boo'. But as Christians, we seem to have adopted the idea that people can only be so much, do so much, and have so much, and all based on our own created standard about what people should be, do, and have. Instead of seeing people's unique gifts and abilities, blessing them when they prosper and are doing things that bring them joy, releasing, empowering and encouraging them to 'go for it', we try to make them like us. We unwittingly take away

their freedom to be who they are through comments, discouragement, and sometimes even control, because who they are doesn't match our view of what they should be like. We want them to live the same kind of life we do because we cannot see that any other kind of life is possible, valid or acceptable.

Is this the freedom that Christ died for? Certainly not! He said that, "Whom the Son sets free is free indeed." What does that 'indeed' mean? It is used for emphasis and means 'really', 'truly' or 'certainly'. In other words, the freedom that we find in Christ should be the GREATEST freedom we could ever experience, not only freedom from sin, but freedom in every area of our lives! This is not freedom to just be negligent or irresponsible, but to be completely who we are without shame, and to do things, with the best wisdom we can, that are the inspiration of our hearts to do, and that bring pleasure to us, others and God. It is a freedom that releases us from people-pleasing to be secure in who God has made us. It is a freedom to think 'big' when others around you would like you to think 'small'. When we can truly be free to be who we are, and do the things we love to do, we will have greater joy, and bring greater joy to the world.

The world shouldn't be walking in the greatest freedom. It should be the Christians, the Church! Our life in Jesus should offer the GREATEST freedom that has ever existed and ever will exist in the history of this universe. There should be no freedom greater than what we find in Jesus. If our Christian life, or our experience of church or other Christians brings oppression and kills the life and light inside us, robbing us of inspiration, joy, creativity and personal choice, we can assume that somewhere we have descended into legalism, church tradition, and wrong thinking that steals our freedom in Christ.

Just as this world is subject to the scientific Law of Entropy* (the law that things left to themselves decay), it seems we Christians can also be affected by that law. What that means is that in spite of the fact that Jesus has paid for absolute freedom for us, as humans we have a tendency to let our freedom decay and put ourselves back into captivity to human ways of thinking and doing, instead of God ways. The Christians in Galatia were guilty of doing that. Instead, we need to break out of the chains that hold us down and recognize that God does not place the same limitations, or expectations, on our lives that we or others do. He set us free to be and do amazing things, things that are even beyond our imaginations, if only we would take off the limits and be ourselves in him.

How can we do this? By seeing the real Jesus, the

The Greatest Freedom

One who set us free, in His Word. But there are two ways to study the Word. One is to study it as a rule book—a list of dos and don'ts, a book of laws that, if we follow them, will make us 'true' and 'good' Christians. This is what has been done in many churches. However, this has produced a cloning of Christian people who think that being a Christian is about following certain traditions, worshipping in a certain way, restricting the activities of Christian women, and being quick to criticize our fellow believers.

The other way to study the Word however, is to study Jesus, who He is, what He is like, and what He did. As we truly get to know Him, we will see that He is the One who encourages, inspires, empowers, and releases people to be all He has made them to be. He does the same things now that He did in the days of the New Testament—and all He does sets people free. Of course, Jesus is the exact representation of His Father so we can know that God is that way too. When we get to know Jesus, we get to know the Father, and He is the Creator, Instigator, Source, and Giver of the Greatest Freedom that has ever existed.

Since those early years as a believer, a lot has happened. My family and I have been missionaries in China, Thailand, and the UK, lived in over 20 different homes and met men and women from a vast number of nations. I have taught the Bible to both men and women, and home-schooled my children for over 10 years. The only thing I ever wear on my head is my hair, or a hat to keep off the

weather. As well as dogs and a cat, we have ducks and rabbits, and orphaned and rejected children come to our home for animal-assisted therapy to help them grow in their ability to trust people. My dog and I are now a trained and certified Therapy Dog Team and have invitations to visit sexually-abused girls, HIV-positive children, and the elderly.

The freedom to achieve things that are different can come at a cost—unpopularity with people who want my Christianity to fit *their* model of what a Christian should be, do and have, and what a missionary should be, do and have. It takes courage to walk in freedom, but God did not call us to be popular. He called us individually to be unique and free, and His people to be the greatest expression of freedom in the world today.

When people who don't know God see my life, I want them to see the freedom that they have not yet tasted. I want them to see the inspiration, life, joy and creativity of the Holy Spirit. I want them to see the real God, not a pre-packaged Christian clone put together on a church assembly line! They need to see someone who is unique and different, expressing the heart of God in the way that God has created *me* to do.

Jesus paid for my freedom and yours with His own blood. At over 40, I realize that I have only one life, and that life is mine! And God and I intend to enjoy it to the utmost together, reveling in the GREATEST and most empowering freedom ever given! CATALYST

* www.icr.org



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