

Perspective

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Are We Really Liberated and Free?

Americans highly value the freedoms we have been guaranteed by the U.S. constitution. Americans have strong protections for free speech, religion, and association, and the right to freely travel within the borders of the U.S. and abroad. The same rights exist in other countries of the Western world, and like the U.S., they highly value the freedoms democracy affords. Each July 4th the United States celebrates that prized freedom. July 4 symbolizes the birth of the United States as an independent nation, representing freedom, unity, and the pursuit of happiness.

Freedom is somewhat complex in the Bible. However, the story of man begins with freedom gone awry. In His generosity, God told Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, *“You are free to eat from any tree in the garden.”* There was only one restriction: *“But you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat from it you will certainly die”* (Genesis 2:16–17). Even with all that freedom, from the very start man misused freedom, rebelled against God, and brought death on the world. So, are we then really free?

God wants His people to be free!

God desires that His people be free. Seven times in the book of Exodus God’s direct message to Pharaoh through Moses was, *“Let My people go”* (Exodus 5:1; 7:16; 8:1, 20; 9:1, 13; 10:3). Pharaoh refused, and would not listen. God redeemed His people out of Egypt and out of servitude *“with a mighty hand and outstretched arm”* (Psalm 136:12). The national freedom God granted Israel becomes a fitting picture of the spiritual freedom God grants us through Jesus Christ, who is *“worthy of greater honor than Moses”* (Hebrews 3:3).

Man, on the other hand, does not desire that men go free. There are always “catches” within the governments of human beings. God is a different kind of King and ruler than man. I Samuel 8 shows us God’s manner of rule. Prior to the time of the kings, for 350 years, Israel was ruled by judges. The judge’s era began with the conquest of the land of Canaan in about 1400 BC and ended with the establishment of the monarchy, around 1050 BC. The judges served as military leaders and arbiters of disputes. Notable judges include Deborah, Gideon, Samson, and Samuel. The book of Judges in the Bible details their stories and challenges. During the rule of Samuel, Israel rejected that system of judges; they wanted a king like the nations around them, and it deeply troubled Samuel: *“But the thing displeased Samuel when they said, ‘Give us a king to judge us.’ So, Samuel prayed to the LORD. And the LORD said to Samuel, ‘Heed the voice of the people in all that they say to you; for they have not rejected you, but they have rejected Me, that I should not reign over them.’* (I Samuel 8:5-7)

Then God told Samuel in verses 9-18, *“Now therefore, heed their voice. However, you shall solemnly forewarn them, and show them the behavior of the king who will reign over them.’ So, Samuel told all the words of the LORD to the people who asked him for a king. And he said, ‘This will be the behavior of the king who will reign over you: He will take your sons and appoint them for his own chariots and to be his horsemen, and some will run before his chariots. He will appoint captains over his thousands and captains over his fifties, will set some to plow his ground and reap his harvest, and some to make his weapons of war and equipment for his chariots. He will take your daughters to be perfumers, cooks, and bakers. And he will take the best of your fields, your vineyards, and your olive groves, and give them to his servants.’”*

The governments of man can never give true freedom. We love our native countries, but even the freest have flaws. Democracies always have hidden corruption and injustices. The United States celebrates its 250th year on July 4, but how long will it last? A statement was made by Benjamin Franklin on September 17, 1787, at the conclusion of the Constitutional Convention in Philadelphia. When asked by Elizabeth Willing Powel, a prominent Philadelphia socialite, whether the new government would be a republic or a monarchy, Franklin responded, “A republic, if you can keep it.”

Having a monarchy in ancient Israel meant the king would institute military conscription and taxation; with God’s rule there would be freedom from that. A median-income American household earning roughly \$83,700 a year pays around \$20,000 to \$21,000 in combined federal, state, and local taxes, putting the total effective tax rate in the neighborhood of 24-25%. After the death of Solomon, heavy taxation is what split Israel. The ten tribes

became the northern kingdom of Israel centered in Samaria, and to the south, the kingdom of Judah (II Chronicles 10:14-15).

Freedom from eternal death

The gift of God is eternal life, but the wages of sin is death (Romans 6:23). The ultimate problem with man has always been that he does not want to cease from sin. God, in His great love, offers us the free gift of salvation through Jesus Christ's atoning sacrifice at the crucifixion (John 3:16). Those who are in Christ have been freed from eternal punishment for their sins (1 Thessalonians 5:9).

Isaiah foretold the mission of the coming Messiah and the freedom Christ would bring: *"The Spirit of the Sovereign Lord is on me, because the Lord has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners"* (Isaiah 61:1). Jesus said, *"And a slave does not abide in the house forever, but a son abides forever. Therefore, if the Son makes you free, you shall be free indeed."* (John 8:35-36).

Under the Old Covenant, there was never an offer of eternal life for obedience, and the law only identified sin. The law tells us what sin is (I John 3:4; Romans 7:7-8). That is why the New Covenant is so much better. The apostle Paul, speaking to those gathered in an Antioch synagogue, said this about Jesus: *"and by Him everyone who believes is justified from all things from which you could not be justified by the law of Moses."* (Acts 13:39). No one is justified by the works of the law (Galatians 2:16).

Real freedom can only come when we are free from Sin

The apostle Paul uses the metaphor of slavery and freedom to illustrate a believer's transformation: *"knowing this, that our old man was crucified with Him, that the body of sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves of sin. For he who has died has been freed from sin."* (Romans 6:6-7). I John 3:5 states clearly, *"And you know that He was manifested to take away our sins, and in Him there is no sin."* Our sins were imputed to Christ, and Christ's righteousness was imputed to us (II Corinthians 5:21). In this way, we have freedom from the power of sin. Jesus condemned the religious leaders of His day: *"You load people down with burdens they can hardly carry"* (Luke 11:46). In contrast, Jesus promised *"rest for your souls"* (Matthew 11:29), and He said, *"My yoke is easy and my burden is light"* (Matthew 11:30).

A cautionary regarding our freedom in Christ

Human beings have a predisposition to fall into either ditch on the road. The Bible cautions us about our freedom: *"For you, brethren, have been called to liberty; only do not use liberty as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another."* (Galatians 5:13). We must also exercise self-control (1 Corinthians 6:12). James 1:25 admonishes us: *"But he who looks into the perfect law of liberty and continues in it, and is not a forgetful hearer but a doer of the work, this one will be blessed in what he does."*

The apostle Peter warned that our freedom in Christ never provides an excuse for sin: *"For this is the will of God, that by doing good you may put to silence the ignorance of foolish men— as free, yet not using liberty as a cloak for vice, but as bondservants of God."* (1 Peter 2:15-16).

We have a responsibility to use the freedom Christ gives to choose what is right. *"Clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ, and do not think about how to gratify the desires of the flesh"* (Romans 13:14). When Jesus forgave the woman taken in adultery, He told her, *"Go and sin no more"* (John 8:11). Going toward righteousness is freedom; sinning no more is taking responsibility. Clearly, God wants His children to experience the joy of freedom. That absolute promise should generate great joy in the hearts of God's people.

This incredible freedom of those who have been redeemed in Christ will also be shared with the entire universe---Scripture says it yearns for it: *"For the earnest expectation of the creation eagerly waits for the revealing of the sons of God. For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of Him who subjected it in hope; because the creation itself also will be delivered from the bondage of corruption into the glorious liberty of the children of God. For we know that the whole creation groans and labors with birth pangs together until now."* (Romans 8:19-22)

I don't know if there will be a lot of fireworks when this happens, but maybe God will put on a super amazing light show to celebrate this fantastic milestone! The words of Martin Luther King Jr.'s 1963 famous "I Have a Dream" speech, is apropos; the closing line Dr. King spoke was, "Free at last, free at last, thank God Almighty, we are free at last."