What is Freedom?

James W. Thompson
james.thompson@acu.edu
WHAT IS FREEDOM?

By James W. Thompson

Until a November day in 1989, I was positive that one reality in our world would never change. For as long as I could remember, the world had been divided between East and West, the free world and the totalitarian world. I had stood several times at the Berlin Wall where those two worlds met, and I had watched one dimension of the human tragedy when I saw border guards with guns patrolling one side of the wall and searching cars headed west to be sure that no one escaped. I knew the eerie feeling of walking through Checkpoint Charlie as we were able to move between the two worlds.

I also knew the personal drama that occurred when the two worlds began to face each other at the end of World War II. More than once we have asked our German friend Rosi to tell the story of her experience at the end of the war. Rosi was twelve years old in 1945, the oldest of four children living in the German section of Czechoslovakia known as the Sudetenland. Her father was somewhere at the eastern front in the midst of the chaos, and Rosi’s family did not know where he was or even if he was alive. Rosi, her mother, and her three younger siblings then began a long walk to try to escape the advancing Russian army and to search for her father. They walked for days and nights until they came to the place north of Berlin where they had family and where they thought her father would come if he was still alive. Finally, it was her good fortune that her father returned. But it was not her good fortune to have settled north of Berlin, because they had not escaped the Russian front. Here she spent her formative teenage years until one day when her parents took the family on a trip. What the parents did not tell Rosi and the other children was that they were about to escape the Russian-dominated zone and flee to the West. The children knew nothing until they had finally crossed over into West Berlin. It was their birth of freedom, a day that they would never forget.

It was because of the stream of escapees that the wall was finally erected to keep people in, and it stood there from 1961 to 1989. During that time some people found inventive ways to escape from the East, but hundreds of others died on their journeys to freedom. We can imagine, therefore, the celebration that accompanied the opening of the wall. Crowds from East and West mingled together for the first time, with Beethoven’s “Ode to Joy” playing in the background. Freedom was especially precious for those who were experiencing it for the first time. Finally, of course, all of the people in the eastern zone became full citizens with their countrymen in the West. I know that I will not forget it, and I can only imagine how that day must be implanted on the memories of those who experienced freedom for the first time.

Freedom is, of course, a precious word. People fight wars for it and die for it. Our own country has kept that word alive. Our treasured national documents speak of our “unalienable rights.” The Statue of Liberty beckons the huddled masses who want to
breathe free. When students cried out for freedom in Tianamen Square, they held aloft a papier-mâché Statue of Liberty. They wanted freedom. Those who received their freedom would never want to give it back.

**The Birth of Freedom**

*Freedom* is a nice word. Perhaps some people will be surprised to discover how deeply that word resounds in Scripture. For many people, Christianity is the absence of freedom, for Christianity involves constraints, commitments, and behavioral norms. But Paul, in his letter to the Galatians, reminds the church of the great cost of their freedom. In Gal 4:4 he says, “When the fullness of time came, God sent his son, born of woman, born under the law, in order to redeem those who are under law, that we might receive adoption as children of God.” At the beginning of Galatians, Paul speaks of the one who “gave himself for our sins in order to deliver us from this present evil age.” Paul’s statement that Christ has redeemed us recalls another story that took place long before the time of the Galatians—the story of a ragtag band of slaves who escaped bondage in Egypt to become a free people. They too had been redeemed. They had started out as slaves and ended up as free men and women. They never forgot that moment. They celebrated it at the Passover and retold the story of their new birth of freedom.

We can resonate with Paul’s letter to the Galatians. We may have little in common with that ancient community, but we do have in common that we have heard the gospel—the good news that God has reached out and claimed us; that he has brought us, the people who are not children of Abraham, and made us children of Abraham by nothing less than his own power. The great moment in the lives of those ancient converts was the occasion when they heard the preaching of Christ and were baptized. The moment meant for them Freedom—the knowledge that they belonged to the people of God. They were nothing less than children of God—as much children of God as anyone else. Here was a new world where there was no longer “Jew or Greek, slave or free, male and female.” That is, they were not associate members in the family of God, but full members alongside those who had been there all along.

That was the turning point of their lives—and of ours. Freedom means that God paid the purchase price when we were slaves and said, “You are free.” Freedom means that we are released from the burden of achieving our relationship with God. It means that we all come to Christ on the same terms. We are his children, and we have access to God when the Holy Spirit cries, “Abba, Father.”

But _freedom_ is a misunderstood word. We think of our freedom to do as we please. Perhaps that is what people are searching for when they give their lives for freedom. But we who have been called by God have experienced the real freedom, the freedom to be the adult children in our Father’s house. We know when the prodigal son experienced the true freedom. It was not when he left home to do what he pleased. His real freedom came when he returned to the care of a Father who loves all of his children.

This is freedom. Many of us know this freedom in our families. There is nothing like coming home as an adult to your parents’ house—provided, of course, that you don’t stay too long. I never wanted to be away from home at holiday time because that was the time to be with family. Sometimes, as three generations are gathered together at Christmastime, the adult children begin to tell of escapades they had in their youth—those things that Mom and Dad would not have approved if they had known about them. Then someone always asks about the statute of limitations.

Of course, we know that the statute of limitations has run out because we are the adult children—who no longer live under the rule of our parents. From the adult perspective, we now recognize that the rules we were breaking were good rules.
There was the great moment of freedom when I learned to say grace—a new and exciting word. They were there to protect foolish adolescents. It still happens when my own children come home. They are free now. But I thank God that they have moved beyond adolescence, and they share the values of the home in which they were brought up. This is freedom!

We discovered this Freedom when we realized that the story of the prodigal son was our own story—that God has taken us into his house through his grace and given us equal rights with all of his children. The real freedom is the knowledge that God has reached out and touched our lives and adopted us into his family without our own achievements. We have come to this realization in different ways, but we have all found freedom at the end of our journeys. I recall how much I have appreciated my conversations with students who are first generation converts. I have come to appreciate my own faith more when they have told me what a difference Christ has made in their lives. They know what they are in Christ, and they know what they once were. Like Robert Frost in “The Road Not Taken,” they have taken the road less traveled, and it has made all the difference. By God’s grace—and like the laborers who worked only one hour in the vineyard—they are the children of God with the rest of us who have labored in the heat of the sun and through the many years of Christian service. This is freedom.

Some of us have made our journeys to freedom in a different way. I have those markers on my journey that have made all the difference, and I enjoy looking back over the journey to see where I have been. I get out the photo albums and the slides that refresh my memory. There was the moment of my wedding. It has made all the difference. There were the moments when my children were born. I never forget those dates. It has been a nice journey. There was another event, of course. It was my journey of faith. I recall, not a day, but an entire semester during my undergraduate days when I read the book of Romans for the first time. I also recall reading K. C. Moser’s book The Why of Salvation. I know that God was at work in my life from the day of my birth and through the years of nurture in a good family and in a good church. I know that the day of my baptism was the greatest moment of all. But I have discovered something. I have discovered that God has been doing things all the while. There was the great moment of freedom when I learned to say grace—a new and exciting word. To sing, “Amazing grace, how sweet the sound.” If I had heard the words before, they had not sunk in. That was a great moment of freedom, a marker on my journey. We, like the Galatians, have discovered freedom. We have traveled different roads and have experienced the “alphabet of grace,” to use Frederick Buechner’s words. We have traveled different paths, but they have ended here. Some are first-generation Christians who experience it. Others of us have been down a path where we came to realize that God has reached out with his grace.

This is the joy of becoming a Christian. For some of us, it has been the discovery of the grace of God. It is a journey that we have made together, and we know that we have arrived at a very good place.

On Looking Back

When you have made a journey of this sort, you look back to see where you have been, and you know that you don’t want to go back. Paul reminds the Galatians that, if they are free now, their former life was nothing less than slavery: “You were enslaved to the elemental spirits of the universe.” Not to be among the people of God is nothing less than slavery. Or, to use another of his images, we were under a guardian or nanny until our journey came to its culmination in Christ.

We look back before the days of our freedom, and we know that we do not want to go back. Those people who risked their lives for freedom do not want to go back. We do not want to give up this freedom that we have come to enjoy. The prodigal son wouldn’t want to go back. I look back over my journey, and I do not
want to go back to the time before I discovered this new birth of freedom.

But Where Are We Going?

I would like to tell of our journey to freedom and end it with something like “we lived happily ever after.” It would make a nice story if I were to say that the newly emerging free countries “lived happily ever after.” Sometimes we like to tell the Christian story that way. We look back at where we have been and where we are now, and we speak as if that is the end of the story. I like happy endings. I like movies in which the crisis is resolved, and the hero rides off into the sunset. I like thrillers in which the lawman gets his man, and all of the loose ends are tied up. In fact, the Bible has some wonderful stories of happy endings that describe the journey toward God and end with the discovery of new life. I like the story of the Ethiopian eunuch, who is baptized and rides off into the sunset. I like the story of the prodigal son, because the curtain of the story comes down with a celebration of freedom. And all of these stories come to an end before they have to deal with tomorrow or the unending succession of tomorrows. But our lives go on. We not only survey the past and celebrate the new thing that has happened to us, we also must ask where our lives are going. Frederick Buechner describes his own life as a “sacred journey”:

Since I passed the age of fifty, I have taken to looking back on my life as a whole more. I have looked through old letters and dug out old photographs. I have gone through twenty years’ worth of old home movies. I have thought about the people I have known and the things that have happened that have, for better or worse, left the deepest mark on me. Like sitting there on the couch listening to the sounds of roosters, swallows, hammers, ticking clock, I have tried to make something out of the hidden alphabet of the years I have lived, to catch, beneath all the random sounds those years have made, a strain at least of their unique music. My interest in the past is not, I think, primarily nostalgic. . . . But even if it were possible to return to those days, I would never choose to. What quickens my pulse now is the stretch ahead rather than the one behind, and it is mainly for some clue to where I am going that I search through where I have been, for some hint as to who I am becoming or failing to become that I delve into what used to be.²

Because of that, he says, “I think of my life and of the lives of everyone who has ever lived . . . as sacred journeys.” If our lives are sacred journeys, we have not yet reached our destination. As much as we may enjoy our stories about the moments that have made all the difference, we are still moving on in time. We do not “live happily ever after.” And we do not end our stories with our conversions. Nathaniel Hawthorne in his novel The Marble Faun has one of his characters complain about a bit of statuary that catches the human figure in a transitional posture. The living form, he objects, should never be frozen by the artist in such a halfway position that one viewing it for the second or third time longs to cry out, “Well, get on with it. Throw it or drop it. Stand or fall. Live or die. But don’t just hang there in between!” The lives of the Galatians did not stop with the moment when they discovered the grace of God. Their lives continued, and the next stage on the journey had not been a good one. And now Paul says, “You have turned again to the elemental spirits.” It is as if they have returned to where they were in the first place. They were pagans who did not live under the rule of God at all. Now they have turned to the rule of legal requirements of the Old Testament. They haven’t exactly turned back to the same place. But they have turned away from the freedom that they found in Christ. And the third chapter in the Galatians’ experience was to turn their backs on that new freedom because, they thought, there had to be something more. And Paul says, “You have returned to the elemental spirits.” The Galatians experienced freedom—the freedom to call God “Father.” But that was not enough. Now Paul says that they have become enslaved to those elemental spirits. “You have returned to the slavery you left behind.”

We like to think of our lives as divided into two chapters: There is the search, and there is the discovery. There is the journey, and there is the destination. But, in reality, there is the third chapter that lies ahead. Freedom is more difficult to maintain than to receive in the first place. We notice the struggles of newly freed countries, and we see how hard freedom is to maintain. I recall the words of one of the founding fathers, who, when asked what form of government the founding fathers had
constructed, replied, “It is a republic—if you can keep it.” It is the same in our own society. The question is, Where are we going? And will we maintain our freedom?

We are making a journey together. We celebrate what God has done in our lives. But we also ask, Where is the church going? We know that we are writing that final chapter. We know that we are making the next step of the journey. We have all found the good news. But we cannot stand there like the statue. We will make the next step along the way. Things will not remain the way they are.

Freedom, as we know from history, is more easy to attain than to keep. There is more than one way to lose our freedom, as the Galatians discovered. Freedom is lost when we live in fear of others—when our place among the people of God is subject to the approval of the many norms that others lay on us. We lose our freedom when we live in fear of what others may write about us or say about us or when they threaten us. We lose our freedom when we forget that it is God’s grace that reaches out to us—“Nothing in my hands I bring; simply to thy cross I cling.” Let us not forget that the Galatians fell from grace when they failed to factor in the grace of God.

But freedom can be lost in other ways. It is lost when grace becomes cheap grace. Freedom is lost when grace becomes the cover for apathy, for the decline in commitment. Freedom, as Paul tells the Galatians, can cancel itself out when it leads to a new kind of slavery—a slavery to the impulses and passions. Freedom is lost when we misunderstand it as the freedom to indulge ourselves in whatever way that we wish.

Where do we go when we have discovered freedom? As much as we say that we don’t want to go back, we are tempted. Some will take grace as the excuse for going back. Some will go back to new law-keeping that looks amazingly like the old law-keeping. New legalism: Do this and you will be saved.

The fact is that God wants us to live as grown-up children in our Father’s house. To enjoy our freedom—but freedom where the Father’s will is our will.

JAMES W. THOMPSON is professor of New Testament at Abilene Christian University and editor of Restoration Quarterly.

Notes
1Scripture quotations are the author’s own translation.