

Freedom Is Like Clear Water

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“For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters, only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become enslaved to one another.”
(Gal 5:13. NRSV)

When I was thirteen years old, I visited the United States for the first time with my family in 2009. Until then, my travels were domestic, in South India. I remember coming to Chicago, standing by the pier, and observing how clear the water was. I could clearly see the lake bed. I was so fascinated by the clear water. We were in Chicago for just a week before moving back to India. Since then, whenever I went to any lake, I would always try to see the lake bed. I had photoflashes of the clear Michigan lake pop up in my mind while now gaze at the murky waters in most places I visited. Seven years later, I moved back to the States. Twelve years later, I moved back to Chicago. The first thing I did was to go back and look at the clear water at the pier. I felt content, experiencing what I had initially experienced. It was almost the same, and it left me delighted. Looking back, I realize that clear water represented more than just water. It represented clarity of possibility, longing, and freedom.

The pursuit of freedom is something that we all seek, and freedom looks different depending on where we come from. For some of us, we find education for our quest for freedom, for some, it is finding financial mobility, for some, we want to heal from sickness, and some of us are having difficulties finding a home; a home that offers freedom. What does it mean then to achieve freedom? What comes at a cost in the pursuit of freedom? For most of us, freedom is exercising our will against our will. Let me explain: we trade one comfort for another. For international students traveling to a new country, we are probably sacrificing the basic comforts of home: food, a secure home, and a community that cares for us. Just so that we achieve something that helps us gain respect.

Christian freedom, however, is not just individual success but a call to become bridges of justice and love for others.

I want to draw attention to this verse from Galatians 5:13, where “freedom” and “love” are important to Paul as he addresses the Galatian churches. But “freedom,” “love,” “spirit,” and “flesh” are all important concepts in Paul's letter to the Galatian churches. The structure of 5:13-6:10 of the book “contributes to the resumption of the topic of 'freedom in love' in 5:13-15, followed by a call to a life by the Spirit and a discussion of the opposition between 'Spirit' and 'flesh' in 5:16-18.” This verse is a contradiction.¹

The beginning of the sentence reads “freedom,” and by the end of the sentence, we see the word “enslaved.” This word has painful connotations to communities that have experienced slavery. Therefore, we need to view this text critically, especially in contexts that experience

¹ Kirchsclaeger, Peter G. “The Relation between Freedom, Love, Spirit and Flesh in Galatians 5:13.” *Acta Theologica* 34, suppl. 19 (2014): 130–142.

slavery. And it often becomes difficult to reconcile with these texts. Paul says we are called to freedom, yet we are to be enslaved to one another through love. Then the question arises: How are we supposed to do that? Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, in *Post Colonial Interventions*, states that both slavery and freedom should be understood as socio-political expressions that apply to the lives of real people. It is not limited to the institution of slavery and the ideological effects of ideas on enslaved people.²

However, freedom is often conceptualized at the level of ideology. Paul uses slavery as a metaphor to characterize “the past and present situation of Christians, the religious realm, and the power of sin.” But again, the word “slavery” erases the brutal lived realities of slavery and the power differences between the free and the marginalized people. Pauline letters proclaim that those who accepted Christ are free people. For example, “You were bought with a price, do not become human slaves’ (1 Cor. 6.20; 7.23). The goal of Christian calling is freedom: “You were called to freedom’ (Gal. 5.13), because ‘where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom’ (2 Cor. 3.17).”³ When we come from complex political spaces, we understand this differently. The tension is apparently clear when we read this text in contexts shaped by exclusion and oppression for generations, where longing for freedom is abstract, until it is not.

When we look at the Indian churches, predominant Christian converts are from marginalized communities, who were once outcasts. They constitute about 70% of the total Christian population. They converted because the gospel made them experience human dignity that was once unattainable due to the caste system. People belonging to the lowest castes or outside the caste system are socially, economically, and politically deprived. The outcasts were considered untouchables for centuries. Therefore, the good news of Christ’s love gave them freedom that they never thought they could attain. The phrase “Therefore, you are called to freedom” is meant to remind the communities that they are free to receive the gospel. The caste oppression cannot hold them down, and for them to pursue life in education, social mobility, and cross boundaries that they never imagined before. Now, after achieving this freedom, Paul writes, “now through love be enslaved to each other.” I find this interesting because the same communities that converted into Christianity for freedom are now having second thoughts. Because life as a Christian is still difficult in India, as it is a minority religion. The persecutions and the ambiguous Indian constitution make it difficult for Christian converts to stay Christian and exercise their freedom, despite India being a secular country.

So, Christians who are suffering ask themselves: “Is this even worth it? It probably was better before.”

The struggle to sustain freedom as a community is not new; even the story of Exodus reflects this tension. Both individually and collectively.

The story of Exodus is a great reminder of this phenomenon. Israelites experienced bondage and slavery in Egypt. Yet, as a community, they stood by each other as they journeyed towards their freedom. Once they were alone in the wilderness, the internal conflicts began. Sometimes about food, sometimes about water, and just the frustration of being unsure how to proceed with this newfound freedom, which also led to starvation. Many times the Israelites said, “If only we had died in Egypt.” Truly, they may not have meant it, but familiarity with inflicted

² Fiorenza, Elisabeth Schüssler. “Slave Wo/men and Freedom: Some Methodological Reflections,” In *Postcolonial Interventions: Essays in Honour of R.S. Sugirtharajah*. edited by Liew, Tat-siong Benny, and Rasiah S. Sugirtharajah, 124. The Bible in the Modern World 23. Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2009.

³ Fiorenza, *Postcolonial Interventions*, 140.

suffering sometimes overrides the path to living into liberating freedom. It truly feels like a hassle to have to navigate newfound freedom from scratch.

In Paul's context, enslavement, as a metaphor, could be seen as a guideline for, say, community rules governing belonging. Just because we received freedom, do we now forget our community? Does Paul suggest that freedom is not just individual but also collectivistic? Should we provide the means, the tools, and the resources for communities to succeed?

This reminds me of Patrick Reyes' book, *The Purpose Gap*, in which Reyes discusses how marginalized communities experience a resource gap.⁴ To close the gap, a bridge of opportunities and resources is built by someone who has created a sustainable life or "freedom" through extraordinary circumstances. However, there is an issue. The bridge is not accessible to everyone because it is guarded by "gatekeepers" on either side. The gatekeepers are the ones in our communities who do not wish for us to succeed, or reinstate or uphold patriarchal, hierarchical, or racial norms that are hurting the communities while also actively hurting them. So, they prevent others from achieving attainable freedom, and there is a lack of solidarity or a sense of belonging. Sometimes, unknowingly, we become the gatekeepers.

The journey to Chicago as an international student was pretty hard. The visa hassle tends to take up so much mental energy, and finances do not make it any easier. Sometimes the dream felt too big to achieve, and the gap was quite evident. But many kind people offered to be a bridge through mentorship and by providing resources that helped me reach Chicago, pursue my studies, and see the lake bed through the clear water. Though sometimes I told myself, "Maybe I should go back, that's more comfortable." Perhaps freedom is meaningful when it makes room for others to breathe, belong, and flourish.

To be in community is to remember my journey and to understand the struggles it took me to get here. And when I remember my journey, I will be receptive to my peers' journeys and can extend the support or resources available to me, so that they, too, can see the clear water they long to see.

Paul calls us to love and belong to one another because we are called to freedom. I hope that when we forget the journeys that brought us to Clearwater, God gently reminds us of our resilience that brought us here; so we once again choose to be in community, and to be kind to each other, the same way we received support, kindness, and reason to hope.
Amen.

⁴ Reyes, Patrick B. *The Purpose Gap: Empowering Communities of Color to Find Meaning and Thrive*. Westminster John Knox Press, 2021.