

## **THE FIRST LIBERTY**

**By Paul Penno, Jr.**

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Major Scott Stanger, of Benton, AK, wrote an email to his wife Ronda from Baghdad on January 30, the day of the election in Iraq. Major Stanger describes his day, which included mobs of Iraqis thanking him and the other American soldiers for enabling them to vote. This is a part of Major Stanger's letter:

"The Iraqis' statements to us were all the same: 'Thank you for your sacrifices for the Iraqi people. . . . Thank you for making this day possible. . . . The United States is the true democracy in the world and is the country that makes freedom possible. . . . God blessed the Iraqi people and the United States this day. . . . We have never known a day like this under Saddam. . . . This day is like a great feast, a wonderful holiday. . . .'"

There is something in the human heart that yearns for freedom. We want to be free from those shackles that bind us. Whether those shackles are political, physical, mental, economical, emotional or spiritual, we long to live in freedom.

Religion is "the duty which we owe to our Creator, and the manner of discharging it."

Liberty is "the state of being exempt from the domination of others, or from restraining circumstances. It is the power in any rational agent to make his choices and decide his conduct for himself, spontaneously and voluntarily, in accordance with reasons or motives.

Religious liberty, therefore, is man's exemption from the domination of others, or from restricting circumstances: man's freedom to make his choices and decide his conduct for himself, spontaneously and voluntarily: in his duty to his Creator, and in the manor of discharging that duty.

Since God has created man, in the nature of things the first of all relationships is that to God; and the first of all duties could be nothing but duty to God.

Suppose a time when there was only one intelligent creature in the universe. He was created: and his relationship to his Creator, his duty to his Creator, is the only one that could possibly be. That is the first of all relationships that can possibly be. Therefore it is written that "the first of all the commandments is, Hear, O Israel, the Lord our

God is one Lord: and Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind, and with all thy strength.” Mark 12:29, 30. All there is of any soul is first due to God; because it all came from God. This is the first of all commandments, not because it is the first one that was ever given by spoken word, or that was ever written out; but because it is the first that could possibly be. It is the expression of the first principle of the existence of any intelligent creature. The principle was there, inherent in the existence of the first intelligent creature, in the first moment of his existence.

God has created every intelligent creature *free*—free to recognize that obligation or not, free to discharge that duty or not, just as he chooses.

Accordingly it is written: “Choose you this day whom ye will serve.” Joshua 24:15. “Whosoever will, let him take the water of life freely.” Revelation 22:17. Thus it is absolutely true that in religion—in the duty which we owe to our Creator and the manner of discharging it—God has created man entirely exempt from the domination of others and from restricting circumstances; has made him free to make his choice, and decide his conduct for himself, spontaneously and voluntarily. Religious liberty is the gift of God, inherent in the gift of rational existence itself.

Any service as to God that is not freely chosen by him who renders it is not service *to God*. There can be no virtue in it; there can be none of God in it. Any service rendered to God that is not freely chosen on the part of him who renders it cannot be of God; because “God is love”: and love and compulsion, love and force, love and oppression, never can go together. So any duty, any obligation, anything, offered or rendered to God that is not of the individual’s own freely chosen choice, can neither be of God nor to God.

When the Lord created whatever creature—angel or man—in order that that creature should be happy in the service of God, and in order that there should be virtue in rendering service or worship to God, He created him free to *choose* to do so.

Now freedom to choose to do so, carries with it freedom to choose *not* to do so. Therefore, when God says to all creatures, “Choose you this day whom ye will serve,” it is left to each creature in the universe to decide for himself in his own freedom what he will do; whether he will serve God or not. And when he makes a wrong use of his choice, and chooses not to serve God, *then* God does not

persecute him, does not hunt him. God goes to *find* him, and seeks him to bring *him back*.

When God has made every creature perfectly free to choose to serve him or *not* to serve him—when that creature exercises his choice in the way *not* to serve God, even then God only loves him: for God is only love. The only disposition that God has toward him is to love him, and by every possible means to win him yet to the choice to love him and serve him. That is God, and that is religious liberty.

God's disposition only to love, and not to condemn or oppress, one of his children who has made a wrong use of his freedom to choose, and has chosen not to honor God, is fully expressed in that proclamation and revelation which God made of himself in the mount, as Moses was there with him. God promised to make all his goodness to pass before him, and to make him acquainted with himself. Then in this revelation of Himself, the Lord passed by before Moses and proclaimed: "The Lord, the Lord God, merciful and gracious, long-suffering and abundant in goodness and truth, keeping mercy for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin." Exodus 34:7. This is what he is, not what he does. He cannot cease to be God; and therefore cannot cease to be what is here said, for this is what he is.

What is he?—*Merciful*—full of mercy. Mercy is the disposition to treat people better than they deserve. That is Himself. God never treats anybody, he never will treat anybody, he never can treat anybody, in any other way than better than he deserves; because he is merciful. Therefore, when one, in his freedom of choice which is essential to virtue, which is essential to happiness, and to the true worship of God—when in the exercise of that freedom, any person exercises it the wrong way and makes the wrong choice God is ever merciful to him, treating him better than he deserves, in order that he may be brought to reverse his choice and put it on the right side.

On the evening of April 25, 1958, a terrible tragedy happened on the campus of the University of Pennsylvania. A young Korean exchange student, a leader in student Christian affairs, left his apartment and went to the corner to mail a letter to his parents in Korea. As he turned back from the mailbox, he stepped into the path of eleven leather-jacketed teenage boys. Without a word, they attacked him, beating him with a blackjack, a lead pipe and even with their shoes and fists. Later that evening, the police found this Korean boy in the gutter. He was dead from this beating. All Philadelphia

cried out for vengeance. The D. A. gave legal authority for the boys to be tried as adults, so they could be given the death penalty.

Then, shortly before the trial, a letter arrived from Korea addressed to the D. A. It was signed by the parents and twenty other relatives of the murdered boy. It read in part: "Our family has met together and we have decided to petition that the most generous treatment possible within the laws of your government be given to those who have committed this criminal action. In order to give evidence of our sincere hope contained in this petition, we have decided to save money to start a fund to be used for the religious, educational, vocational, and social guidance of the boys when they are released. We have dared to express our hope with a spirit received from the gospel of our Savior Jesus Christ who died for our sins." That is mercy.

Next God is *gracious*. Gracious is favorable, extending, holding forth favor. And this God does to all creatures, whatever their condition or position may be. God is gracious to every creature, whatsoever the creature may be and whatsoever his condition may be. Consequently, when any one exercises his choice in the wrong way, instead of God abandoning him, threatening him, persecuting him, blotting him out of existence, He is ever gracious, holding forth to him favor, not in any sanction or approval of his wrong course, but in order that if by any possibility he may reverse his choice and use it on the right side.

Shortly after World War II came to a close, Europe began picking up the pieces. Much of the Old Country had been ravaged by war and was in ruins. Perhaps the saddest sight of all was that of little orphaned children starving in the streets of those war-torn cities. Early one chilly December morning an American soldier was making his way back to the barracks in London. As he turned the corner in his jeep, he spotted a little lad with his nose pressed to the window of a pastry shop. Inside the cook was kneading dough for a fresh batch of doughnuts. The hungry boy stared in silence, watching every move. The soldier pulled his jeep to the curb, stopped, got out, and walked quietly over to where the little fellow was standing. Through the steamed-up window he could see the mouth-watering morsels as they were being pulled from the oven, piping hot. The boy salivated and released a slight groan as he watched the cook place them onto the glass-enclosed counter ever so carefully. The soldier's heart went out to the nameless orphan as he stood beside him. "Son, would you

like some of those?" The boy was startled. "Oh, yeah—I would!" The American stepped inside and bought a dozen, put them in a bag, and walked back to where the lad was standing in the foggy cold of the London morning. He smiled, held out the bag, and said simply: "Here you are." As he turned to walk away, he felt a tug on his coat. He looked back and heard the child ask quietly: "Mister, are you God?" God the King is recognized by such graciousness. Amid the sorrow and ruins of a young English boy, a soldier stepped forward with generous grace. That is a picture of God's graciousness.

God is not only merciful and gracious, but *long-suffering*. The definition of God's long-suffering is "salvation": "The long-suffering of our Lord is salvation." 2 Peter 3:15. Then when one makes the wrong use of his freedom, turns his choice to the wrong side, and goes the wrong way, all the disposition that God has toward him, all that he holds out to him is *mercy* and *grace* and *salvation*, seeking to save him from that wrong course, to win him from the wrong use of his choice, to awaken him to himself and to God that he may choose to make the right use of his freedom of choice and choose to recognize and serve his Creator.

"Awake the person to himself,"—awake him to himself and God. This recalls the word that Jesus spoke in the parable of the prodigal son. That parable tells this whole story. There was that son, who chose to leave his father's house and go off for himself; but he made the wrong choice when he started. He was free to choose to do just as he did, but he made the wrong choice, and things did not go well with him.

When he made the choice to live outside his father's house, and away from his father, he went down and down and down, until he reached such a point of deprivation that he would have picked up the husks and wrung some more substance from them after they had been abandoned by the swine. When he reached that point, "he came to *himself*." And the next thing is, when he came to *himself*, *he thought of his father*. And the next thing is that he said, "I will arise and go to my father." Luke 15:18.

The moment he came to himself, the first thought was of his father. All this time what was the father's attitude toward him? While that son was away, wasting his father's substance and degrading himself in riotous living, lost to himself and to his father by his wrong choice, his father was still thinking of him, was still waiting for him, was still longing that he would come to himself, and come home. And

when at last this son did come to himself, and think of his father's house, and said to himself, "I will arise and go to my father," even when "he was yet a great way off, *his father saw him*," and when he saw him he "*ran*" to meet him with joyous welcome, caresses, and kisses.

What is that parable for? It tells the heavenly Father's attitude toward those who make a wrong use of the freedom which he has given to every soul. It tells the divine story of religious liberty. Otherwise, there would be no such thing as freedom. If God treated any creature otherwise than just that way, the word freedom would not express it, for it would not be freedom. Then service might be of constraint, not willing, and so have the taint of bondage not the fragrance of freedom. The freedom of which God is the Author and Giver is freedom indeed. Absolutely, infinitely, and eternally it is so.

There were some Americans stationed on a small island in the South Pacific during WW II. The islanders showed the Americans how they captured monkeys. Put an apple in a wide-mouth jar. Tie a rope around the jar. Tie the other end of the rope around a tree. Wait patiently.

Eventually a monkey will come along, look curiously in the jar, see the apple, reach in and grab it. The monkey's hand easily compressed to fit into the jar but his fist, holding the apple, was too large to pull out. The monkey, however, would predictably refuse to let go of the apple. The monkey was in effect, tied to the tree by the rope, the jar and the apple.

Was the monkey too stubborn or too stupid to let go of the apple? You know what? It really doesn't matter. It is the same result: one dead monkey. Now for the real question. Did the monkey have the apple or did the apple have the monkey? There are so many things that bind us. As long as we hold on to them, their power over us continues. It is only by letting go that we become free. So, what's making a monkey out of you?

Man did use his freedom of choice the wrong way. He did choose to sin, and when he had done this, what is the first manifestation of God's disposition toward him and of God's treatment of him, after he had gone the wrong way in the garden? After the man had made his choice to do the wrong thing, to serve the wrong one, and to go the wrong way, and God came into the garden, it is true that the man was afraid and hid himself. But did he need to be afraid?

Was there on the Lord's side any ground for the man to be afraid of God? Did God go into the garden to condemn or punish the man? No; his fear was but the result of what he had done. He had made a wrong choice, he had started the wrong way, he was under the wrong master, and his own life being separated from God and committed to the wrong, in the darkness and gloom of the evil in which he had been taken, he misjudged God, and so was afraid of him. But when the man was come face to face with God, and the Lord had brought the fault to its original source in the evil one, what then did he say? He spoke the word that means only salvation to every soul: "I will put enmity between thee and the woman, and between thy seed and her seed; it"—the seed of the woman—"shall bruise thy head, and thou shalt bruise his heel." Genesis 3:15. Thus it was the word of salvation that God brought the first thing to the man after he had made his wrong choice. That word of salvation was the promise of the One to come who should break off this evil that had been fastened upon man, set the man free again, and bring him to God, where his choice would be on the right side, and he dwell truly with God.

And when Jesus (of whom this was the promise), came into the world in the flesh, this is His word: "If any man hear my words, and believe not, I judge him not." John 12:47. What word is it that Christ brought that he desires every man should hear? Only the word of God—the word of *salvation*. He is only the Saviour, he is not the destroyer; and therefore his name when he came into the world was given *Jesus, Saviour*, because "He shall save His people from their sins." Matthew 1:21.

His other name, "Emmanuel," which is being interpreted, "God with us." He came as God with us. He came bringing God to man, to make man acquainted with God as the *Saviour*, which alone He is. He came bringing only the word of salvation. When He came presenting that word of salvation He proclaims the whole principle of original and eternal religious liberty—"If any man hear my words, and believe not, I judge him not." John 12:47.

And although that is exactly His words, yet there are professed Christian people who cannot believe that it is there until they have opened their own Bibles and read, and have found that it says just that. And even then, they can hardly believe that it is right. They say, "That is not the way I thought it read, 'If any man hear my word and

*believe*, I judge him not;’ and, if he does not believe, then I supposed that he would be judged and punished for it.”

But that is not the way of Christ and of God. That is the way of the world. That has been for ages the way of *the church*. When the church presents the gospel, the word of God which is committed to the church of God to preach, and the people choose to reject it, then they are immediately judged as unworthy of further attention or recognition, judged to be incorrigible, and then to be compelled to obey, or to be punished for not obeying, the dictates of the church framed into the law of the state. And just there is where the turn is made from religious liberty to religious despotism, from Christianity to anti-christianity.

But that is not the Christian way nor Christ’s way. That is not religious liberty. Religious liberty in the word of Christ is, “If any man hear my words, and believe *not*, I judge him not.” Then when Christ sends us forth as His ambassador to present His word to the people, and we present it to them, and they choose not to believe it, that is their freedom. That is none of our business at all. They do not derive their existence from us, they are not responsible to us, but to God only. We are not to judge them! nor in any way to slight them; but only to love them freely as before, and seek by every possible Christian means to win them to see that what we preach is the word of God, and the word of Christ; and to win them to believe in Him.

God has put His word here to be believed. He longs and waits with all long-suffering for the people to believe it. And when He gives that word to you and to me to present to the people that they may believe it, and at the first they choose not to believe it, and then we treat them so as to offend them, we are preventing the very thing we are sent to do. We are sent to persuade the people to believe the word of God. When a person chooses not to believe it, and I take a course toward him that will offend him, I fix it so that he will not be inclined to believe it. Indeed, he will be less inclined to believe it, and less liable to obey and go in the right way than if he had never heard me at all. By such a course I have defeated the very purpose for which I was sent forth into the world.

Therefore the only true way to treat people when we present the word of God to them and they reject it, is just as lovingly, just as tenderly, just as winningly as the great mercy and loving-kindness and long-suffering of the Lord can enable us to do: that we may still induce them to incline to believe, and in believing choose to go in the



right way. We are commanded to “exhort with all long-suffering.” When Christians take any other course toward those who do not believe, they prevent the very things that they profess to be trying to accomplish.

A story tells of a man who was imprisoned within an ancient stone dungeon. A grey shadowy jailor shook the iron lock on his daily rounds. It was the only sound that reminded the prisoner he was not alone in all the hopeless, dim and dying world of his solitary cell. The crime of which he was charged was unforgivable, and the verdict was death and irrevocable, but still he secretly harbored the defiant belief that he would, one day and by the cleverness of his own wits, find a way of escape. But despite all his tunnels, his schemes and his plans, he remained as always within the dungeon walls.

Years beyond number had passed from consciousness as he sat and plotted how he would set himself free. Then one day an unfamiliar figure appeared at his prison door. This was not his jailor who always rattled the lock. Instead, this person stood silently staring with his hands upon the bars. An air of sorrow emanated from his silhouette.

“What do you want?” growled the prisoner nervously. He wondered if the king had finally commanded his execution. “Have you come to kill me?”

The heavy silence broke with these gentle words, “I have come to set you free.”

Momentarily stunned, the inmate hesitated before spitting back, “No one can do that except the hangman or me. Are you the hangman?”

“No,” replied the stranger. “I am the one who will take your place that you may go free.”

“Don’t mock me!” the prisoner fumed. “Only death or my own devices can liberate me! And since, as you can see, I am still here, then you can bet I’ll get out of this prison someday.”

“No one can break free from these walls,” the strangers motioned around him. “But I can and I will set you free. You do not know me, but I have known you and loved you all your life.” The stranger turned slightly away, “I am going now to the king to purchase your freedom. In three days, your cell door will be unlocked. On that day, you will be free. You will have only to believe what I have told you. You have only to open the door and leave on the third day.”

“Do you think I’m crazy?” shouted the prisoner, but the stranger made no reply. “The king would never forgive my crime no matter who you are or think you are!” his words trailed after the vanishing silhouette. “I’m the only one who can set me free,” he cried, “and someday I’ll find the way out! Me, I . . . I can do it!” But there was no further reply and the stranger was gone.

That same day the jailor came again to rattle the lock, and the next day he did the same. Nothing was different. The prison was still dark and damp. The lonely emptiness still dripped from the stone cold walls. The prisoner still sat arrogantly and plotted and schemed.

But on the third day the prisoner felt the floor begin to rise as though the earth were sucking in a deep breath. The walls trembled and the iron bars rattled and rang out in a deafening clanging. Stone blocks cracked and fragments shattered on the floor. The very rocks roared. For an instant, it seemed like the ancient dungeon would split asunder, but then it stopped as suddenly as it had begun. The silence was deafening. The prisoner sat shaking in a fearful sweat—huddled in the farthest corner from the door.

“Is this the third day?” the thought flashed through his mind. The calm had been restored; dark silence returned; it was all normal again. No guard appeared to rattle the lock, but after all, he could still see the lock in the dim light.

“A false hope,” muttered the prisoner. “Nothing has changed; nothing will ever change unless I change it.” And the prisoner resumed his squatting, thoughtful pose in the dank darkness of his dungeon. Meanwhile, down the distant corridor, other prisoners pushed wide their creaking cell doors and danced into the light of their liberty.

This story is our story. All who sit within the sound of my voice are either free in Christ or still prisoners by their own choice. If you have not, yet, known the freedom of Christ’s love, then know this—Jesus Christ died to set you free from sin and death. He is the only one in history who ever rose from the grave. He did so for you. He conquered death so that you will never have to know death. He purchased your freedom with His blood. You have only to believe this and push open your prison doors.