

The battle cry of freedom
Hebrews 12

The Rev. Dr. L. Gregory Bloomquist
Christian Reformed Church (Dixon's Corners, ON)
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Introduction:

Slavery is an abstract thing unless you have lived it. One of the only ways that people today can hear about what it is like to be made a slave, how it happens, and what it feels like, is to hear actual slaves tell of their experiences.

The country of Sudan is one of the few places in the world today to which both political liberals and political conservatives look and agree: slavery goes on there. Here are the words of a young girl, Mende Nazer, who was made a slave:

I was living in a village, Karko, in the Nuba mountains with my parents, two sisters and two brothers. We had a very simple life. One night, when I was 12 or 13, we heard a noise outside. The village was under fire. People were screaming and there was confusion. We didn't know what we had to do, my dad said `Mende, trust me, grab me hard.` I clung on to him and he told my mum to stay close to me. We had to run, we had to survive.

When we finally reached the mountains, raiders were everywhere. We couldn't escape. Many people were dead. We ran and ran; we had nowhere to hide. It was very crowded and I lost my dad. Somebody caught at me and said `I will protect you and I will take you back to your parents later.` I said okay. I believed him really because it was very dangerous. I saw people being killed in front of me; they killed the people at night, and raped the girls... [He] took me from this place to somewhere in the forest.

When I got there I found some girls and boys there and stayed with them, he said to stay there. They were around 10 and 12 years old.

We were happy because we all thought we were going back to our parents later. But after a while, all the raiders came and took everybody to a place called Geling, about a day's walk away. I was there for a few days; everyday people came and took children away. A man came to the camp and chose us; I was taken in a car with five other girls to a house in a place called Khartoum. He would not let us out. We had to work all day. One by one the girls were taken away. One day, a woman came and took me away. ...

I stayed with this woman for six or seven years. I had to do very hard work, I had to do everything: clean the house and big yard, wash clothes by hand and look after her children; [over time] there were five. ... I was beaten for every single thing, even for something that was not my fault. ...

From the beginning in my master's house I didn't realise I was a slave, I was confused; I wondered why I was here. Later on, my master was talking to her friend and she said two things that made me

realise. One was she mentioned she owned me. The other, she called me `Abda` to her friend. She called me her slave. From that time on I understood who I am. From the beginning she treated me badly and beat me; even then I couldn't understand why. It was only when she said she was my owner and that she called me Abda then I understood. [\[1\]](#)

Overview of the previous week's sermon:

Last week, we looked at Paul's plea to the Christians living in Galatia, to Christians who had been slaves, who had been freed, but now who had returned to their slavery. Paul was baffled by this turn of events, as you and I would be if Mende had been freed and then returned willingly to her slavery. After all, the Galatian Christians had been slaves: they simply did what they were told, in daily drudgery, with no view ever to doing anything different in their lives, often being tormented by their masters. True, they were slaves to invisible powers and lords: Law, sin, flesh. But, they were still slaves. But, they had become sons, like those privileged few males who shared their fathers' freedom, who uniquely learned from their fathers in obedience how to enjoy their freedom as citizens, and who eventually become free, land-owning citizens, shaping the country that was theirs. Except they were sons of the Almighty Father himself and had inherited all that was His.

Why would they go back to slavery?

Well, there are reasons. One is: if you have never known anything else but being told what to do, finally having freedom to do whatever you want is scary.

But there is more, as I said last week. For with the freedom to be sons, there comes also a great responsibility: to undertake the training and discipline necessary to defend the freedom that is yours. Freedom without any responsibility may be attractive; the freedom that also demands the responsibility to fight to retain that freedom may not be so attractive.

The sons alone will fight this battle. They will undergo training to fight. This includes athletic training and competitions, like the Olympics. These competitions will be especially useful for identifying who will be the heroes on the battlefield and who will be the weaker ones who will need to be supported.

They train for the day when they will have to defend their freedom because they will have to defend it some day. There will always be those enemies who will seek to take from them what is theirs. Enemies who want riches and who want power over others, to enslave them and to tell them what to do.

Paul had only just begun to teach the Christians in Galatia about their responsibility as sons when they got cold feet. As soon as he began to tell them that they were in training for a day when it will become necessary to defend the freedom of the sons of God from the attempts by evil oppressors to enslave them and to continue to enslave those to whom freedom has been declared, they probably said: "is there anyone else we can listen to?"

How naive they were. The fight for freedom will always be necessary because evil will always seek to enslave. How? By making those who have been freed answer first to someone or to something other than God the Father, who alone is to be obeyed, that is, learned from. It still happens today:

- It happens in the Sudan, but it also happens when political leaders command armies to invade countries and enslave for themselves the free sons of God.
- Slavery also happens right here in our own towns and homes. There is sometimes a power of evil that is at work in families over generations, as one lie is told and then more lies need to be told to cover the first. You can feel this evil in some families, or even in some houses, when you walk in and you feel that the people there are chained to ghosts and things that are long dead.
- Slavery also happens when a spouse, or a father or mother in a family, or a community leader, listens to the voice of those who try to convince the family or the community to conform to the way “we” do things around here and to value things that “we” value. Only too late do you realize that heeding that voice has bankrupted you by making you try to live your life just as your rich neighbour does or has made you miss out on the best years of your children’s life by making you work at the office until the middle of the night, as you worked for what was fleeting.
- Slavery also happens in individual lives when a power takes over your life that seeks to make you do what it says regarding your body.
 - It may be failures in your past that are keeping you chained by making you think that you can’t succeed where you have failed.
 - It may be through addictions that make you serve them and which lead only to death (though of course it does not appear that that’s where it leads until it’s too late). You may not even realize that you are a slave, until it’s too late!

There are many, many would-be slave-masters out there, all seeking to enslave the free sons of God. To fight against these is the battle that is to be fought by all the sons of God, whether attacked or not. It is a battle for freedom and against the attempt to enslave.

The lead-up to the battle: The great battle cry of freedom (Hebrews 12):

The battles of antiquity were long and fierce. The battle for Troy lasted 11 years.

But the battles were not just about fighting. The battles began with extensive preparations and also with speeches by the leaders, inspiring their troops for battle. Think of Achilles’ or Agamemnon’s speeches before the assaults on Troy. Think of the words of Goliath to the Philistines, or of David to the Israelites. Think of Shakespeare’s great retelling of the speech of Henry the Fifth before the battle of Agincourt on the feast of St. Crispin.

The sons of God have a great battle speech that stands out above the others. And since our battle, like those of ancient Greece and Rome, is about freedom, in defence of the homeland against an enemy who would oppress us, I call Hebrews 12, the great battle cry of freedom ... of the sons of God.

There are four questions that this speech addresses:

(1) what kind of army will we be on the battlefield?

(2) what is the main danger that we as an army of the sons of God face?

(3) what motivates us in the heat of battle?, and

(4) who leads the army on to the field and whose lead are we, the sons of God, to follow on the field of battle?

1. The appearance of the sons of God in battle

Before the battle even begins, the enemy must know that the sons of God mean business and that they will triumph. A half-hearted appearance of the sons of God on the battlefield, unsure how to use their weapons, not listening to their Father who leads them, fear showing in their faces, would make the enemy rejoice. That's not how Jesus defeated Satan!

What makes those who come to enslave you tremble in their boots is when the sons of God appear before them well trained at the Father's own hand, whom alone the sons of God are to obey, whether they are men or women, young or old, skilled or unskilled, strong or weak: **vss 5-7: ⁵And you have forgotten that word of encouragement that addresses you as sons: "My son, do not make light of the Lord's discipline, and do not lose heart when he rebukes you, ⁶because the Lord disciplines those he loves, and he punishes everyone he accepts as a son." ⁷Endure hardship as discipline; God is treating you as sons. For what son is not disciplined by his father?**

Just as you would not think of participating in the Olympics unless you had trained for years, so the Greek son would never have thought of participating in a battle against a great opponent unless he had trained for years, including the training for the Olympics, obeying his father and learning from him. The son of God who has not undertaken training under the leadership of his Father, should not even think of fighting in this battle.

You may say: but I'm just a simple person, or I'm an older person, or I'm but a child. My friend, the Lord calls all the sons to train for this battle. If you do not want to be trained, you cannot be a son: **⁸If you are not disciplined (and everyone undergoes discipline), then you are illegitimate children and not true sons.**

And how will this trained army appear? Just as the sons of Greece were trained by their fathers to resemble them -- slaves were never trained to be like their masters! -- so this is training by God the Father himself so that we might be true sons of the Father. They were trained to be like their fathers who owned land and were wealthy; we are trained to be like our Father in Heaven, who is characterized by one thing: holiness: **vss. 9-10: ⁹... we have all had human fathers who disciplined us and we respected them for it. How much more should we submit to the Father of our spirits and live! ¹⁰Our fathers disciplined us for a little while as they thought best; but God disciplines us for our good, that we may share in his holiness.**

What is holiness? It is this: have you ever encountered a sight so beautiful, so amazing, that it took your breath away. That is what characterizes God, and that is what is supposed to characterize the sons of God.

When people see us, they are to see something reflected in us that is of God, something so beautiful, so amazing that it is like nothing on earth.

You might say: well, how can we be trained for this? Ah, now there is a great sermon. I can't preach that sermon this morning, but I can tell you this: training in holiness consists primarily in the examination of your life to see the areas where you are becoming more and more like what a son of God should be like -- free from all worldly enslavements.

As you grow in holiness, there will be an amazing change in you. People will look at you and say: what's different? People will remark about the peace that characterizes you, about your character, your gentleness, your self-control, your care for those who are enslaved in this world and who are weak but who can be freed: **vss 11-13: ¹¹No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it. ¹²Therefore, strengthen your feeble arms and weak knees. ¹³"Make level paths for your feet," so that the lame may not be disabled, but rather healed. 14. Make every effort to live in peace with all men and to be holy; without holiness no one will see the Lord.**

In other words, holiness shines forth all those ways in which you evidence that the Spirit of God has taken charge of your life and is remoulding you as a son of God. That is what the enemy faces on the battlefield and the he trembles at the sight.

2. The unity of the sons of God in battle

One of the great dangers among great armies comes not from without but from within. It is not that they cannot defeat the enemy; it is that they cannot agree on what they are supposed to do, or why they are in the field in the first place.

Some will break ranks, or there will be friction between some, with some soldiers accusing others of not deserving attention. Whatever the reason, while they squabble, the enemy will attack.

So, the battle cry of freedom warns the sons of God against disunity. Especially disunity that is caused by playing with potential slave masters like sexual lust, or the temptation to make other gods your father, or the claim that you are more important than your brother: **vss 15-17: ¹⁵See to it that no one misses the grace of God and that no bitter root grows up to cause trouble and defile many. ¹⁶See that no one is sexually immoral, or is godless like Esau, who for a single meal sold his inheritance rights as the oldest son. ¹⁷Afterward, as you know, when he wanted to inherit this blessing, he was rejected. He could bring about no change of mind, though he sought the blessing with tears.**

My church, the Anglican Church of Canada, is at a point right now, where it is playing with potential slave masters in the form of misguided sexual teachings and the willingness to call on other gods if the Father won't answer the way we want Him to. It is rapidly moving to the point where it will be necessary either to repent as a church and begin to act on the holiness of God in our day, or for those of us who sincerely seek to be holy sons of God above all else to separate ourselves off from that church and carry out the fight independently of those for whom God's holiness is but a trifle. The battle cannot be won by

squabbling over tactics: the battle against the enemy can only be won by a holiness that reflects the holiness of God.

3. The image that motivates us as sons of God in battle

In the heat of battle, what image is there to motivate the sons of God to keep struggling on behalf of freedom? Slaves in eastern armies and in the Islamic armies of more recent days fight as fiercely as they do because are motivated by fear: they fight with all that they have because they know that they will be sacrificed unless they do.

They are motivated by visions that cause them to fear, visions that inspire terror in them. That's what motivates the slaves of the evil Sauron in Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*. Slaves come to **vss 18-21: ¹⁸... a mountain that can be touched and that is burning with fire; to darkness, gloom and storm; ¹⁹to a trumpet blast or to such a voice speaking words that those who heard it begged that no further word be spoken to them, ²⁰because they could not bear what was commanded: "If even an animal touches the mountain, it must be stoned." ²¹The sight was so terrifying that Moses said, "I am trembling with fear."**

But, what motivates the sons, those who comprise the army of freedom? The author of the battle cry of freedom sets before the sons of God the image that should motivate them through it all. It is not a vision of terror nor even a vision of what might happen to their land should they lose, but a vision of the free and joyful worship of the city of God as worshippers surround the merciful and wise Father, a city in which there will be found only those who enjoy that freedom and worship: **vss 22-23: ²²But you have come to Mount Zion, to the heavenly Jerusalem, the city of the living God. You have come to thousands upon thousands of angels in joyful assembly, ²³to the church of the firstborn, whose names are written in heaven. You have come to God, the judge of all men, to the spirits of righteous men made perfect.**

4. The leader of the sons of God

And above all you have come there thanks to one who both freed you to be sons and then led you as sons in your freedom and in the battle to remain sons, Jesus, the Messiah.

Every great army is indebted not simply to the heroes who fight in it but to those who lead it. While the Olympics have always been about heroes, the modern Olympics have been about athletic heroes pure and simple. After the Olympics, they go their own way, to who knows where. But the ancient Olympics were about heroes who trained at the Olympics for a much greater competition, the fight for freedom.

In that competition there will be one whose voice will summon the sons to fight and will lead them in battle. In our battle, the one who summons us to battle and leads us forth is the very same one who has made us sons of God through his own battle on behalf of our freedom, a battle that is to be our model as we fight for the freedom of others.

His name is Jesus. This is the final image that motivates the sons of God in the heat of battle: **vs. 24: You have come to ... Jesus the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.**

We are to have him in our sight throughout the whole battle, whether it be in the Sudan , or in our homes, or in our individual lives: **vs 2: ²Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.**

He is the one we are to hear and follow as we seek to fight against those who would enslave us by reminding us of our past failures, or our financial slavery, or our fear of world terrorism. And we should do so in the fight to ensure that others who are slaves are freed from their slavery and come under the Lordship of Christ: **vss 3-4: ³Consider him who endured such opposition from sinful men, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart. ⁴In your struggle against sin, you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood.**

His death and victory resurrection present to us the model for the sons of God.

Conclusion

There will always be a battle to be fought until the last battle is fought and won. The sons will work the fields; they will rejoice in the wife of their youth and the children of their youth; they will study and sing and delight in the good inheritance that their Father gives them.

But they will do so with an ear always trained to be attentive to the sound on the distant shore, the sound of an enemy, landing on their free shores with one goal, to enslave them and to take them hostage, along with their wives and children, and to pillage their land. They will be attentive to the cry from their neighbour's farm that the enemy has already taken some and made them slaves and they will arise to retake them and to return them to being sons.

Mande Nazar concludes her own story, which ends happily with her freedom, about her desire now that she has been freed: :

“Now I feel I'm free because I am doing things I never used to do before ... For me the reason for talking out is to help make another slave free -- not just a slave from Sudan, but from anywhere in the world. By talking out, people will be more aware and more able to help people become free.”

That is the spirit of a true son! When the sons of God hear the sound of the enemy, they will not hesitate to go forth to battle for freedom, their own or that of their fellow citizens of the heavenly city. They will do so not with the weapons of human war, or with the weapons that the slave master use to make slaves, but dressed in the brilliant holiness of God himself, who is unstained by any immorality nor tainted by any slavery himself.

And as we go forth, we will be cheered on, as we had been in the stadiums during our training. We will hear innumerable voices of those sons who go with us.

vs 1: ¹Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us.

Can you hear them cheering? Those who even now are struggling in distant lands or over in the neighbouring city in the same battles that we are engaged in? Your parents and grandparents, or others close to you who have gone before you to the city of God? Even the saints of ages gone by? Can you hear them, whether you are now training or are already engaged in battle?

The sons know that they may fall in this battle. But if they do, they will not die; they will join with all of those voices of the sons of God whose voices also fill the stadium and who cheer on those who do not simply enjoy their freedom but who fight to defend it, for they know that those who have gone before, who have died in Christ are in fact alive in Christ.

They also know this may be just one more battle for freedom, just as there have been and will be many battles for freedom. But they also are aware that this may be the last battle for freedom, the one that ends all battles, the battle in which God will consume all that is not holy, all that is not true, when he will shake the heavens and the earth, this awesome God (12.25-28).

But, whatever we do, we do so because we have learned to be sons of God from the only one who is “son of God” by nature, Jesus, the Messiah, the one who freed us from slavery, the one who gave us the right to be called sons of God.

To him, be all glory and honour, majesty and dominion, both now and for all time.

Amen.

<http://www.antislavery.org/homepage/news/mendenazarfeature.htm>