

Celebrating Service that Won Our Freedom!

1. As He died to make men holy,
2. Let us die to make men free.

Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus,² because through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit of life set me free from the law of sin and death.³ For what the law was powerless to do in that it was weakened by the sinful nature, God did by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful man to be a sin offering. And so he condemned sin in sinful man,⁴ in order that the righteous requirements of the law might be fully met in us, who do not live according to the sinful nature but according to the Spirit.

*Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ,
who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ.*

Ephesians 1:3

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It sits underneath bulletproof glass, shielded from ultraviolet light, guarded by multiple armed guards, protected by a 14-foot high spiked gate, behind the 36-foot bronze doors of the National Archive. It's one of America's most prized possessions. What is it? A piece of paper. A two hundred thirty-two year-old piece of paper. It's the Declaration of Independence signed first by John Hancock and rest of the Continental Congress. It's said that when John Hancock signed it, he said, "*There, King George can read that without his spectacles!*" And so, America declared its freedom from Mother England. The document listed the numerous offenses of King George and the corrupt British government, which neglected and mistreated its own citizens in the colonies. But the Declaration of Independence inaugurated a new beginning for the 13 colonies. It took nearly 8 years of bloodshed before the war ended and freedom was certain. Many lives were lost to win that freedom for America. Today we remember the service given by the founding fathers and all who won that freedom for us. But also today, through the inspired words of the Apostle Paul, we remember the ultimate service of Jesus Christ who won *spiritual* freedom for us.

I.

2000 years before the Declaration of Independence inaugurated a new beginning for America, the Lord of the universe inaugurated a new beginning for all mankind. He did this by sending his Son in human flesh. But why was there a need for a new beginning?

For what the law was powerless to do in that it was weakened by the sinful nature, God did by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful man to be a sin offering" (3).

Why was a new beginning needed? Because the law was powerless. In our Old Testament lesson, we see Moses reminding the Israelites how God had given his people his law. He had put his commands and stipulations and decrees in their hearts. If they had kept his law, things would've gone well for them. If they had obeyed God in everything without fault, then heaven would have been theirs. But the law could not save. As the Apostle says, "*it was weakened by the sinful nature.*" Man's sin made the law a scrawny weakling when it came to being right with God—it couldn't save us any more than Thomas Jefferson could single-handedly defeat the Redcoats with his quill pen. The law was powerless. That's why the Israelites had to make animal sacrifices over and over to atone for their failures to keep God's law. Only by the shedding of blood could their sins be dealt with. But when would all the sacrifices end? When would something take the place of the law? Because the law just didn't cut it.

That's why a new beginning was needed. That new beginning happened when Jesus came in flesh and blood to become a sin offering for mankind. He was the one Sacrifice to end all sacrifices. As our lesson from the book of Hebrews reminds us, Jesus was the High Priest who offered himself as a sacrifice once for all time and for all men. As the inspired writer puts it, **"because by one sacrifice he has made perfect forever those who are being made holy"** (Hebrews 10:14). While it took 8 years of fighting to win freedom for America, for Jesus it was a 33-year fight against sin and the devil. And he won. He never once gave in to either of them. And he won the fight against death when he rose from the grave. *That* was the new covenant—the new beginning: Christ's one-time sacrifice declared the world not guilty before God. His one-time sacrifice declared the world free from the guilt of sin and the power of death. This is the freedom we Christians celebrate every Sunday and every day. What a blessing it is to live in a land where we are free to gather together to celebrate and worship Christ! This is a blessing and a freedom that not all Christians possess.

It's easy to take for granted our freedom of religion, our freedom to assemble, our freedom to speak our minds and freedom to travel all over our country—all freedoms won by the service and sacrifice of others. Of course, we want all Americans to be patriotic and love their country and the freedom it affords them. But what if you're not patriotic? What is the government going to do if you don't love America? While I'm sure we could see some day people try to legislate patriotism in our country. But really, it's unlikely that the government is not going to try to force you to be patriotic. That would be a contradiction to the freedom that makes us patriotic. But what about God? God knows that we don't always appreciate our spiritual freedom in Christ either. He knows it's easy to take for granted the freedom won by *his* service and sacrifice. God has every right to hold us guilty for taking him for granted. He knows that like the Israelites, who forgot that they were once slaves in Egypt, we often live life forgetting that we were once slaves of sin and death. He has every right to declare us guilty-as-charged and to take away every freedom we possess. He has every right to enslave us again to sin and death and hell.

But just as U.S. history teaches us to appreciate what others did to win our political freedoms, so God's history—God's gospel does the same. But God's gospel does more than just communicate that service, sacrifice and freedom. God's gospel, by the Holy Spirit, opens our hearts to him and makes that spiritual freedom ours. The gospel tells us precisely what God did in history. Today it tells us through the Apostle, **"And so [God] condemned sin in sinful man,⁴ in order that the righteous requirements of the law might be fully met in us, who do not live according to the sinful nature but according to the Spirit."** The law had left sinful man empty of righteousness and full of sin. We can picture the law of God as an empty container that must be filled up with holiness in order for us to be right with God. When it came to the law, we were empty and we could do nothing to add a single drop of holiness to it. But Christ, by his perfect and holy life, filled this container to the brim with all the holiness we needed to be right with God. And the sin that used to fill it—well, instead of condemning sinners, God condemned sin itself, in the flesh of Jesus Christ, crucified. He got our sin—and was punished for it, we got his righteousness—and were rewarded for it.

The Battle Hymn of the Republic, which we just sung, has a verse that describes this gospel history. In the third verse we sung, *"In the beauty of the lilies Christ was born across the sea, With a glory in His bosom that transfigures you and me: As he died to make men holy, let us die to make men free, While God is marching on."* Christ's perfect service and sacrifice won our freedom. He died to make us holy. He died to make us free. And now as Paul writes, **"Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus"** (1). That word condemnation carries with it a sense of a *guilty verdict*. So we might say, *"now there is no guilty verdict for those who are in Christ Jesus."* How can there be a guilty verdict when there is no sin

to make us guilty? How can there be a guilty verdict when all that's left is Christ's holiness filled to the brim? This is the history that taught us we were free—the history the Holy Spirit uses to help us know and appreciate all the freedom in Christ we have.

That's the way it was for Moses and the Israelites was it not? Moses encouraged God's people to not forget the history of their deliverance from Egypt. He told them that when their children asked about the Passover and the sacrifices and the other laws, they were to tell them this: **"We were slaves of Pharaoh in Egypt, but the LORD brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand"** (Deuteronomy 6:21). In other words, *"We do all these things to remember how the LORD has set us free!"* Isn't that why we celebrate the 4th of July too? Even though it didn't become an official paid federal holiday until 1941, people began celebrating July 4th as early as the year after the Declaration of Independence was signed. On all our patriotic holidays like July 4th, we look back to where it all began. We remember all the blood that was shed and the lives that were given not just in the Revolutionary War but in all the wars fought for our freedom. We remember all those who have served and sacrificed for us and our country. On patriotic holidays we also remember those who gave their lives in the line of duty on days such as 9/11. We've all heard people say it, we've seen the shirts and the bumper stickers: *never forget 9/11*. Isn't that what holidays are for—so we never forget how we came to be where we are? That's why the Passover was celebrated, that's why the 4th is celebrated and why 9/11 is commemorated. That's how we continue to remember all the service given to win and preserve our freedom.

II.

That's why, in a sense, every day for the Christian is more than just a holiday. Every day for the Christian is a holy-day. Every day is a new beginning for us. Every day is a celebration and commemoration of the new life we have in Christ. Paul writes, **"through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit of life set me free from the law of sin and death"** (2). And then he tells us that we no longer **"live according to the sinful nature but according to the Spirit"** (4). Literally he says, *"we walk in line with the Spirit."* That's how Paul describes our freedom in Christ. While we once lived under the law of sin and death we now live under the law of the Spirit of life. But what exactly does that mean? Well, it helps to know that Paul uses the word *law* here in a special sense—in the sense of a *controlling power*. So he's saying we no longer live under the controlling power of sin and death but now we live under the controlling power of the Holy Spirit—the Holy Spirit who gave us life. So we are now dead to the controlling power of sin and death. That's what Paul meant when he wrote the words, *"I have been crucified with Christ"* (Galatians 2:20). Because of that new life—that new beginning in us by the Holy Spirit, sin no longer has control over us. We walk daily in line with the Spirit, which means we daily die to the sinful nature. Every day for the Christian a death and resurrection take place. Every day we die to the old sinful self and its desires and let the new life in the Spirit live free.

Maybe you've already noticed how the two key points of this sermon are taken from the last verse of The Battle Hymn of the Republic. Referring to Jesus, the poet writes **"As He died to make men holy, let us die to make men free."** We've already seen how Christ died to make us holy, but how do we die to make men free? I suppose you could see it from the political perspective—the war perspective: many *have* died to make us free in this country. Their acts of service and sacrifice we celebrate especially today. If we look at it in a spiritual sense, however, it's harder to understand. When we spiritually die to our sinful selves, how does that make others spiritually free? After all, none of us can set another soul free from sin and death. None of us can do what only the Holy Spirit can. But when Christians die to self and live for Christ, when they die to their old lives of sin and walk according to the Spirit, when they put aside their own agendas and live to share the gospel of Christ, then the Holy Spirit will work through them to set souls free. Oh, the wonderful things God does when Christians die to self and live for Christ!

How amazing that Christ has died to make you holy and free and he lets you take part in setting others free as well!

There is a long and rich history in our country of men and women serving and sacrificing to win freedom for us. And there is a long and rich history for Christians culminating in Christ's service and sacrifice for our freedom—and both are histories we get to be part of. Would that every American citizen were patriotic—that everyone loved this country and appreciated all the freedoms we enjoy, all because of the service and sacrifice of others! Would that every citizen of the world were a Christian—that everyone loved Jesus their Savior because they knew his perfect service and sacrifice set them free! As he died to make us holy, let us die to make men free. Amen.

*Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts,
since as members of one body you were called to peace.*
Colossians 3:15

