

Remember That You Were Slaves

Deuteronomy 5:15, 15:15, 16:12, 24:18, 22

Winning Sermon in the 2005 Baptist Heritage Preaching Contest

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When we celebrate the Fourth of July, we are reminding ourselves as Americans that we have not always been free. That's why we have an Independence Day—to keep us from taking freedom for granted, to make us teach our children that once we were *not* independent, once we were under tyranny. There was a time when we did not have the liberty to gather in Baptist churches and to worship as we felt led by God. It is essential to being a Baptist that we remember our history.

In the book of Deuteronomy, Moses is speaking to the people of Israel just before they cross over the Jordan River into the Promised Land, just before they really become a nation. One of the themes of that book is the command to remember. When you become rich, when you become powerful, when you live in freedom, don't forget God who gave you that freedom. Don't take freedom for granted, as if you deserved it or had earned it for yourself. Five times, Moses says to the people, "Remember that you were slaves in Egypt." Don't forget where you came from. Don't forget that you yourselves were oppressed, that for three hundred years you had no freedom to come and go, no freedom to choose your work, no freedom to worship God as he commanded. This became the basis for ethics in the Promised Land. When you think of how you will treat the powerless in your own country—the fatherless, the widows, and the foreigners who come to your country to work because the economy in their own countries is so poor – remember that you were slaves yourselves in Egypt. Let's review those five commands to remember that you were slaves.

First, Deuteronomy 5:15 is about the Sabbath day. This is part of Moses' restatement of the Ten Commandments. This verse provides the rationale for not working on the Sabbath. It's not enough to stop working yourself. You must not make your male and female servants work either. Don't even make your animals work. And don't make the aliens who are among you work either, whether they worship me or not. Why? "Remember you were slaves in Egypt and that the Lord your God brought you out of there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm." You were once in the shoes of those who work for you, and you know what it is like to long for rest. So give them a break. Include them in the joy of my Sabbath.

Second, Deuteronomy 15:15 is about the Sabbath year. God's law said that every seventh year all debts would be cancelled. God even said, "Don't think in the sixth year, I'd better not loan that person in trouble any money, because next year the debt will get cancelled, and I won't get paid back. Go ahead and be generous to that person who needs help." In the Sabbath year, all indentured servants (who had become slaves to pay off debt) were to be set free. And, God said, don't send them away empty-handed; supply them liberally with sheep and grain and wine. Why? "Remember that you were slaves in Egypt and the Lord your God redeemed you. That is why I give you this command today." Do you see how that remembering functions as a basis for ethics?

Third, Deuteronomy 16:12 is about the Feast of Weeks, what we call Pentecost. God's law said that when you celebrate this feast in the temple you are not to limit it to your family. You are to include your male and female servants, Levites (the church staff!), aliens, the fatherless, and widows. Be inclusive, and provide for those who have little. Why? "Remember that you were slaves in Egypt."

Fourth, Deuteronomy 24:18 is about justice and generosity. The verse before says, "Do not deprive the alien or fatherless of justice." That's a more general principle about looking out for the powerless that have no ability to influence the judges. But the verse goes on, "Do not take a widow's cloak as collateral." It is all she has to keep her warm. Just lend the money to her freely. Why? "Remember that you were slaves in Egypt."

Fifth, Deuteronomy 24:22 is about gleaning. This law said that if you miss part of your crop when you are harvesting (grain, olives, or grapes), don't go back over the field a second time. Leave the leftovers for the aliens, the fatherless, and the widows. Why? "Remember that you were slaves in Egypt." Remember that you were poor yourselves once, you were powerless, you were oppressed, and let that memory shape the way you act when you are free.

This basic ethical principle—that our own experience of having been the victims of oppression shapes our attitude toward those whom we could oppress—applies to the way Baptists today think about religious liberty. We gather in freedom. We celebrate the fact that we are free to worship as we feel led by God and that we are not under the control of the government or any other authority. As Baptists, we should not take that freedom for granted. Baptists stand firm for religious liberty because we remember that we have not always been free. It is deep in our Baptist consciousness that we were once an oppressed minority, persecuted by the government and by the church when the two were in cahoots. It's in our DNA as Baptists to stand for freedom because we remember that we were slaves.

In the early 1600s, a group of Christians began to recover basic principles from the New Testament, which we now call Baptist principles. Some of the most important were these:

1. The Bible is our authority, not a human creed imposed by church or state.
2. Christ alone is Lord. Neither Caesar nor the king is the lord over the believer's conscience.
3. Each person must be free to accept or reject Christ, or there can be no true faith and no true discipleship. Therefore, we cannot baptize babies who cannot choose. People cannot be considered Christian because they are born in a certain country.
4. The church is made up of people who have chosen to follow Christ. Each believer is equal before God and each has access to the Holy Spirit. Church membership must be freely chosen, and church leaders must be freely chosen as the Holy Spirit guides the members. Leaders must not be imposed upon the church by religious authorities or the government.

These were radical views in the seventeenth century, although they have become common in America. Our Baptist forebears were not free to hold these beliefs without persecution. They paid a heavy price to teach these truths. They were persecuted by the church and the state. Let me just mention four firsts for Baptists.

First, the first Baptist church on English soil was led by Thomas Helwys, who wrote in 1612 the first plea for complete religious liberty in the English language, called *A Short Declaration on the Mystery of Iniquity*. He even sent a copy to the king, with a handwritten note attached that said, “The king is a mortal man and not God, [and] therefore has no power over the immortal souls of his subjects.”¹ Helwys was promptly thrown into prison, and he died there in 1616.

Second, the first Baptist church in America was founded by Roger Williams, who lived in a Calvinist state where Christian values were the law of the land, the kind of government that some people dream of today. Williams lived in Massachusetts, the land of the Pilgrims, where church and state were almost one; but when he began to teach that babies should not be baptized, he was excommunicated and banished from the colony. He lived in the wilderness for weeks before founding the town of Providence and the colony of Rhode Island, the first experiment in true religious liberty. Williams wrote in *A Bloody Tenent of Persecution* that “an enforced uniformity of religion throughout a nation or civil state confounds the civil and religious, denies the principles of Christianity and civility, and that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh.”²

Third, the first Baptist church in the South was started by New Englanders who were being persecuted by the state church. In 1680, a pastor named William Screven led twenty-eight members of a small congregation in Kittery, Maine, who were being oppressed by the Massachusetts government and state church, to get into a ship and sail for freedom! They landed in Charleston and founded the First Baptist Church of Charleston, which became the mother church of Baptists in the South.

Fourth, the First Amendment to the United States Constitution is there because of the influence of a Baptist pastor, John Leland of Virginia, who persuaded James Madison that Baptists would not support the Constitution without a guarantee of religious liberty. In Virginia, the Church of England oppressed Baptists, and Leland himself had preached from a prison cell because he denied the state's right to require a license for preaching. Leland wrote in 1791: "Government has no more to do with the religious opinions of men, than it has with the principles of mathematics." He said, "Let every man speak freely, without fear, maintain the principles he believes, worship according to his own faith, either one God, three Gods, no God, or twenty Gods; and let government protect him in so doing."³

We who are Baptists need to remember that we were slaves. We come from people who stood for liberty and were oppressed. Baptists have not only been oppressed by Communists and Hindus and Muslims. In this country, Baptists were oppressed by Presbyterians and Episcopalians. Even when we find ourselves in a majority, we need to remember that we were slaves. When we find ourselves in positions of power, we need to remember when we were powerless. That is what Moses said to his people, and that is what Helwys and Williams and Screven and Leland would say to us.

Baptists don't just stand for freedom for ourselves, or just for freedom for Christians. Thomas Helwys stood for freedom for all people in the early 1600s: "Let them be heretics, Turks, Jews, or whatsoever, it appertains not to the earthly power to punish them in the least measure."⁴ George Truett, pastor of the First Baptist Church of Dallas, Texas, stood before the Baptist World Alliance in 1939 and declared, "Baptists make this contention, not only for themselves, but as well, for all others—for Protestants of all denominations, for Romanists, for Jews, for Quakers, for Turks, for Pagans, for all men everywhere."⁵ When we have a Christian majority in the classroom, we need to think of what state-sponsored prayer means to a Jew, a Muslim, a Hindu, or an atheist. We need to remember what it is like to be a minority—what it is still like to be a Christian in Saudi Arabia or Sudan or China or parts of India. When we remember that, when we

remember that we were once slaves, we will stand for freedom for all.

This is where Baptists part company with some other Christian groups. The Roman Catholics have a history of working together with emperors and kings to rule over Europe, and so it is their natural tendency to want to seek alliances with government to fund the work of the churches. The Reformed churches, including the Presbyterians, look back to a golden era in places like Geneva and in Holland where the church was able to take over the government and mandate Christian behavior for everyone. The state-supported church was the norm for Lutherans in Germany and the Anglicans in Great Britain. But we Baptists come from more radical stock. We were the rejects in those state churches. We were enslaved by religious people who said they were running the government according to God's Word. But we knew better. It was that very Word of God that had set us free from sin and death, free to go directly to God without any mediator but Jesus, free to worship as the Spirit led us.

That is why we Baptists look with suspicion on efforts by governments anywhere to impose religion on their citizens—whether it is state-sponsored Islam in many countries, or party-sponsored Hinduism in India, or the possibility of government-supported Christianity in the United States. We remember that we were slaves. We stand for the freedom of every human being to hear the gospel because we know that it is a matter of life and death. We stand for the freedom of every human to accept or reject Christ, because we know that proxy faith and coerced faith are not faith at all. We stand for the freedom of every human to worship God as he or she chooses, because God will only be worshiped in spirit and in truth. God has made it clear that the recitation of rote prayers when our hearts are far from him makes him sick, and it is no worship at all.

We continue to have controversy over the Pledge of Allegiance. The pledge is not a prayer. It is not an act of worship. If it were an act of worship, I could not participate in it as a Christian. It is a statement of my allegiance as a citizen to my own country, and the thing that keeps it from being idolatrous—the thing that keeps the pledge from demanding absolute allegiance, which would make it worship—is the inclusion of two little words, “under God.” Under God does not mean that this is a Christian republic. Under God means that this nation is not above God. Like all nations, it is under the sovereignty of almighty God. Nations rise and fall, nations go through periods of corruption and revival, but God never changes, and God reigns over all the affairs of humankind. God is above every government and above every human institution. Baptists have always said that our ultimate allegiance is to God who sits upon the throne and to the Lamb, to whom belong praise and honor and glory and power, forever and ever. We are a people under God, a people who remember that we were slaves, and a people who remember who it was that set us free through our Lord Jesus Christ.

¹Reprinted in Richard Groves, introduction to *A Short Declaration of the Mystery of Iniquity (1611/1612)* by Thomas Helwys, Classics of Religious Liberty, vol. 1 (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1998), xxiv.

²Roger Williams, *The Bloody Tenent of Persecution, for Cause of Conscience Discussed in a Conference Between Truth and Peace*, Classics of Religious Liberty, vol. 2, ed. Richard Groves (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2001), 4.

³John Leland, “The Rights of Conscience Inalienable,” in *The Writings of the Late Elder John Leland, Including Some Events in His Life, Written by Himself with Additional Sketches*, ed. L. F. Greene (New York: G. W. Wood, 1845; repr., Gallatin, TN: Church History Research and Archives, 1986.), 184.

⁴Thomas Helwys, *A Short Declaration of the Mystery of Iniquity (1611/1612)*, Classics of Religious Liberty, vol. 1, ed. Richard Groves (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1998), 53.

⁵George W. Truett, “The Baptist Message and Mission for the World Today: Presidential Address,” *Sixth Baptist World Congress, Atlanta, Georgia, July 22-28, 1939: Official Report*, ed. J. H. Rushbrooke (Atlanta, GA: Baptist World Alliance, 1939), 28.