

CALLED UNTO LIBERTY

Six days ago, the people of the United States commemorated the day the Second Continental Congress of the English colonies in America ratified the Declaration of Independence. The Americans won their independence from Britain, and preserved the rights given to them by God, but they knew that freedom can be lost, and that they must be vigilant to preserve it. In particular, they understood that men cannot be free without Christian virtue. John Adams, one of the signers of the Declaration of Independence, affirmed this to his cousin, Zabdiel Adams, a Congregational minister:

Statesmen my dear Sir, may plan and speculate for Liberty, but it is Religion and Morality alone, which can establish the Principles upon which Freedom can securely stand.... The only foundation of a free Constitution, is pure Virtue, and if this cannot be inspired into our People, in a greater Measure, than they have it now, They may change their Rulers, and the forms of Government, but they will not obtain a lasting Liberty. They will only exchange Tyrants and Tyrannies. You cannot therefore be more pleasantly, or usefully employed than in the Way of your Profession, pulling down the Strong Holds of Satan. (John Adams, letter to his cousin, Zabdiel Adams, 21 June 1776)

There can be no liberty without Christian virtue, the essence of which is love of God and man.

When God made man, He blessed them and said to them, “Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it.” (Genesis 1:28) This was God’s command, but it was also His blessing. It was His decree of what would be, like His decree concerning the creatures of the sea and air, in which He blessed them and commanded them, “Be fruitful, and multiply, and fill the waters in the seas, and let fowl multiply in the earth.” (Genesis 1:22) Man, like the animals, was fruitful, and did multiply, as God had blessed them to do. They determined that they would not fill the earth, however, and they took their stand against God. They said, “Go to, let us build us a city and a tower, whose top may reach unto heaven; and let us make us a name, lest we be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth.” (Genesis 11:4) So God confused their language, thereby hindering their cooperation, and compelling them to scatter over the earth. Those who spoke the same language remained together, but separated from the rest. This was the origin of the various nations. (Genesis 10)

After God separated the people at Babel, He separated Abraham from his people, and so created a new nation, the nation of the Hebrews. When God separated Abraham, He made a covenant with him. He said to him:

Get thee out of thy country, and from thy kindred, and from thy father's house, unto a land that I will shew thee: And I will make of thee a great nation, and I will bless thee, and make thy name great; and thou shalt be a blessing: And I will bless them that bless thee, and curse him that curseth thee: and in thee shall all families of the earth be blessed. (Genesis 12:1–3)

So, Abraham left his people and his place, and went to a new place where God would make of him a new people. The fulfillment of God’s promise depended upon the obedience of Abraham. Later, God repeated to Isaac the promise He had made to Abraham. He said:

For unto thee, and unto thy seed, I will give all these countries, and I will perform the oath which I swore unto Abraham thy father; And I will make thy seed to multiply as the stars of heaven, and will give unto thy seed all these countries; and in thy seed shall all the nations of the earth be blessed. Because that Abraham obeyed my voice, and kept my charge, my commandments, my statutes, and my laws. (Genesis 26:3–5)

The descendants of Abraham in Egypt did increase in number. The Scriptures say, “And the children of Israel were fruitful, and increased abundantly, and multiplied, and waxed exceeding mighty; and the land was filled with them.” (Exodus 1:7) So great did their number become that the pharaoh feared that the Hebrews would conquer the Egyptians. So, the pharaoh put the Israelites in bondage. God, however, for the sake of His promises, would deliver them. He revealed to Moses that He would deliver them from their bondage, and bring them to the land of Canaan which He had promised to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. (Exodus 3:7–9, 16, 17) After God delivered the Israelites from bondage in Egypt, He had Moses bring them to Mount Sinai, and there made a covenant with them. He said to them:

Ye have seen what I did unto the Egyptians, and how I bare you on eagles' wings, and brought you unto myself. Now therefore, if ye will obey my voice indeed, and keep my covenant, then ye shall be a peculiar treasure unto me above all people: for all the earth is mine: And ye shall be unto me a kingdom of priests, and an holy nation. (Exodus 19:4–6)

The people agreed to terms, saying, “All that the LORD hath spoken we will do.” (Exodus 19:8) So, God’s covenant with Israel had both promise and obligation, right and duty. Just as God blessed Abraham, because he obeyed, so God would bless Abraham’s descendants if they obeyed. So, God gave Israel Ten Commandments, His moral law.

When Israel finally arrived at the border of the promised land, God renewed His covenant with them, reminding them of His promises and their obligations. He told them that God would bless them for obedience, and curse them for disobedience. Moses said to them:

Behold, I set before you this day a blessing and a curse; A blessing, if ye obey the commandments of the LORD your God, which I command you this day: And a curse, if ye will not obey the commandments of the LORD your God, but turn aside out of the way which I command you this day, to go after other gods, which ye have not known. (Deuteronomy 11:26–28)

Moses warned them of what would become of them should they break their covenant with the Lord. He would bring upon them the curses He threatened, and He would remove them from their land to another land. (Deuteronomy 29:27, 28) What the future held for Israel, God only knew, and the people did not at this point need to know. They only needed to know what God required of them. Moses said, “The secret things belong unto the LORD our God: but those things which are revealed belong unto us and to our children for ever, that we may do all the words of this law.” (Deuteronomy 29:29)

Yet, Moses did anticipate their national apostasy, and He held out hope for them to be restored to God’s good graces. If, in their foreign captivity, they would repent, and obey the Lord, then He would restore them to their land, and make them more numerous, and more prosperous, than He made their forefathers. He said:

And it shall come to pass, when all these things are come upon thee, the blessing and the curse, which I have set before thee, and thou shalt call them to mind among all the nations, whither the LORD thy God hath driven thee, And shalt return unto the LORD thy God, and shalt obey his voice according to all that I command thee this day, thou and thy children, with all thine heart, and with all thy soul; That then the LORD thy God will turn thy captivity, and have compassion upon thee, and will return and gather thee from all the nations, whither the LORD thy God hath scattered thee. If any of thine be driven out unto the outmost parts of heaven, from thence will the LORD thy God gather thee, and from thence will he fetch thee: And the LORD thy God will bring thee into the land which thy fathers possessed, and thou shalt possess it; and he will do thee good, and multiply thee above thy fathers. ((Deuteronomy 30:1–5)

If God's people would serve Him with all their entire beings, and keep His entire law, then He would bless them as He had blessed their forefathers. There was a great difficulty in this, however, for people are always the same; their natures do not change. The Israeites after the exile would be no different from the Israelites before. How, then, could the people of God ever do better? How could they ever be a faithful people? If God told them to try harder, it would not matter. God had to change them. He had to effect a change in their hearts so that they would love Him with their hearts, and keep His commandments from their hearts. Moses said to them:

And the LORD thy God will circumcise thine heart, and the heart of thy seed, to love the LORD thy God with all thine heart, and with all thy soul, that thou mayest live. And the LORD thy God will put all these curses upon thine enemies, and on them that hate thee, which persecuted thee. And thou shalt return and obey the voice of the LORD, and do all his commandments which I command thee this day. (Deuteronomy 30:6–8)

God would, in a New Covenant, give His people new hearts so that they would from the heart love and obey Him.

If God's people would with good hearts be faithful to Him, if they would with God's help fulfill their obligations to Him, then He would bless and prosper them. Moses said:

And the LORD thy God will make thee plenteous in every work of thine hand, in the fruit of thy body, and in the fruit of thy cattle, and in the fruit of thy land, for good: for the LORD will again rejoice over thee for good, as he rejoiced over thy fathers: If thou shalt hearken unto the voice of the LORD thy God, to keep his commandments and his statutes which are written in this book of the law, and if thou turn unto the LORD thy God with all thine heart, and with all thy soul. (Deuteronomy 30:9, 10)

God's will for them, that is to say, His moral will for them, was no secret. He quite clearly made known to them what He required of them.

For this commandment which I command thee this day, it is not hidden from thee, neither is it far off. It is not in heaven, that thou shouldest say, Who shall go up for us to heaven, and bring it unto us, that we may hear it, and do it? Neither is it beyond the sea, that thou shouldest say, Who shall go over the sea for us, and bring it unto us, that we may hear it, and do it? But the word is

very nigh unto thee, in thy mouth, and in thy heart, that thou mayest do it. (Deuteronomy 30:9–14)

God's will was not hidden from them, nor was it out of their reach. God is in heaven, it is true, but He does not there keep His will hidden. No one need ask someone to ascend to heaven to learn God's will, for God had revealed it. God's will was not to be found abroad, across the sea, in some far off land. No one need travel a great distance to learn it, for God had revealed it to His people. The people broke covenant with God, not because they did not know His law, but because they did not love God and His law as they ought.

An expert in the law of Moses, wishing to test Jesus, asked Him what he must do to inherit eternal life. Jesus in return asked the man what he, an expert in the law, thought the law teaches on the subject. The man answered, "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy strength, and with all thy mind; and thy neighbour as thyself." (Luke 10:27) Jesus told the man that he had answered correctly, and told him to do those things so that he might have life. Jesus had some time before taught His followers to love all men, even their enemies, by doing good to them. He said:

And as ye would that men should do to you, do ye also to them likewise. For if ye love them which love you, what thank have ye? for sinners also love those that love them. And if ye do good to them which do good to you, what thank have ye? for sinners also do even the same. (Luke 6:31–33)

Jesus said, "Therefore all things whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them: for this is the law and the prophets." (Matthew 7:12; Compare Matthew 22:34–40) The lawyer asked Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?" (Luke 10:29) He asked this because He did not love all men, but only His family and friends, and, wishing to justify His lack of love, pretended that the identity of a man's neighbor is unclear. So, Jesus told the man the parable of the Good Samaritan. In order fully to understand the parable, it is necessary first to understand the history of the Jew and the Samaritan. In the days of the divided monarchy, Omri, when he became king over Israel, built his capital city, and named it 'Samaria,' after the man from whom he purchased the land, and the kingdom came to be known as Samaria. (1 Kings 16:23, 24) After the Assyrians carried the Israelites away into exile, Essarhaddon, king of Assyria, brought other peoples into the land to populate it. It says in the second Book of Kings:

And the king of Assyria brought men from Babylon, and from Cuthah, and from Ava, and from Hamath, and from Sepharvaim, and placed them in the cities of Samaria instead of the children of Israel: and they possessed Samaria, and dwelt in the cities thereof. (2 Kings 17:24; compare Ezra 4:2, 10)

Although the new Samaritans came to worship the God of Israel, the Jews did not recognize them as God's people. Therefore, the Samaritans built their own temple on Mount Garizim, and worshiped God in their own way. A Samaritan woman said to Jesus, "Our fathers worshipped in this mountain; and ye say, that in Jerusalem is the place where men ought to worship." (John 4:20) When the Jews returned to Palestine from their exile Babylon, the Samaritans asked to join them in rebuilding the temple in Jerusalem, but the leaders of Judah refused them. In response to is refusal, the Samaritans opposed the Jews, and hindered their work. So the Samaritans and Jews had a feud lasting many generations, such that, in the time of Jesus, Jews had, as Saint John wrote, no dealings with Samaritans. (John 4:9) In Jesus's parable, a Jewish man was beaten, robbed and

left for dead on the side of a road. First one Jewish man passed him by, and then another, his own kin. Finally, a Samaritan man approached, and, having compassion, tended to his wounds, and brought him to an inn where he took care of him. Next day, the Samaritan had to leave, but he left the Jewish man in the care of the innkeeper, and promised to return to pay the expense. Jesus asked the lawyer which of the three men that saw the wounded man was a neighbor to him, and the lawyer replied, "He that shewed mercy on him." Jesus told him, "Go, and do thou likewise." (Luke 10:37) It is just like the sinful nature to take a clear matter of loving one's neighbor, and try to obscure it. A man's neighbor is his fellow man, and to love one's neighbor is to do good to him. Moreover, to love God and man is the sum of the law of God.

Under the New Covenant, obedience to God begins with a single command, the command to believe in Jesus Christ. Saint Paul wrote to the Romans:

For Moses describeth the righteousness which is of the law, That the man which doeth those things shall live by them. But the righteousness which is of faith speaketh on this wise, Say not in thine heart, Who shall ascend into heaven? (that is, to bring Christ down from above:) Or, Who shall descend into the deep? (that is, to bring up Christ again from the dead.) But what saith it? The word is nigh thee, even in thy mouth, and in thy heart: that is, the word of faith, which we preach; That if thou shalt confess with thy mouth the Lord Jesus, and shalt believe in thine heart that God hath raised him from the dead, thou shalt be saved. For with the heart man believeth unto righteousness; and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation. (Romans 10:5–10)

Under the Old Covenant, God commanded His people to obey His law, but, because they were sinners, they could not do it, and so they stood condemned and in need of forgiveness. Under the New Covenant, God commands people to believe in His Son, Jesus Christ. For those who do so believe, God gives them forgiveness of their sins, and a new heart to obey His law. No one should ask for someone to ascend to heaven to find the way of righteousness, for Christ has already descended from heaven. No one should ask for someone to descend into the netherworld to find it, for Christ has already risen from the dead. If one would be righteous before God, then He must confess that Jesus is God incarnate, and that He has risen from the dead after dying for men's sins.

Under the New Covenant, obedience to God begins with faith in His Son, but it does not end there. The Christian is bound to keep the moral law of God, the essence of which is, "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy strength, and with all thy mind; and thy neighbour as thyself." Saint Paul wrote to the Galatians, "For, brethren, ye have been called unto liberty; only use not liberty for an occasion to the flesh, but by love serve one another. For all the law is fulfilled in one word, even in this; Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself." (Galatians 5:13, 14; compare Romans 13:8–10)

Let us understand that liberty requires virtue. Let us believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, the source of all virtue. Let us love God, and His Son with all our hearts, and our neighbors as ourselves.

Unto him that loved us, and washed us from our sins in his own blood, And hath made us kings and priests unto God and his Father; to him be glory and dominion for ever and ever. Amen.