



TRUTH APPLICATIONS

Articles

“In Heart and Conscience Free”

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“Our fathers, chained in prisons dark, were still in heart and conscience free; . . .” ~ Frederick W. Faber

Singing it with a room full of preachers, elders, and our wives at a dinner and again two nights later in an area-wide worship service attended by more than 1,100 reminded me how much I like the hymn, “Faith of Our Fathers!” It was during the worship service that I was especially struck by the first part of verse 2, quoted above.

As a lifelong citizen of “the land of the free,” it’s hard to imagine what it would be like to be “chained in prisons dark” for any reason, especially religious ones. I’ve read accounts of people in such situations—in the Bible (Jeremiah, Paul), early church history (Polycarp), the Reformation (the translators John Wycliffe and William Tyndale), the Holocaust (Elie Wiesel and Dietrich Bonhoeffer), and contemporary missionaries suffering in societies that are very different from ours.

The stories *never* fail to impress and *always* make me wonder whether I will do as they did if called on to do so. But at present there is no way I can identify with those sufferers. Their circumstances are just too different from the ones I’ve experienced.

What I can say and take a measure of comfort from is that their actions reinforce a truth Scripture demonstrates. Political freedom is not necessary for regular worship, holy living, or doing good works. In fact, the testimony of history is that the church has often thrived in times and places where hostility against it was the worst.

At one level at least, it’s not really that hard to understand why. Before choosing to begin and stay on a course that may end in execution, people will tend to be very sure about their commitment to that way. We are not surprised, therefore, when the level of devotion demonstrated in dire circumstances exceeds that found in less threatening settings.

I intend no criticism of those of us who have been blessed with the providence of freedom. And I’m not suggesting that, because we are free, we cannot practice cross-bearing discipleship, or take seriously Jesus’ words about the correspondence between

great blessings and more responsibility (see Luke 12:48). I am saying that Jesus' reign has *never* been "of this world" (John 18.36), a reality that means no way of the world is *necessary* to live so that his will is done.

Understanding that reality takes us closer to being a people who, though "chained in prisons dark," will be "still in heart and conscience free."

March 2012; revised February 2021
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