

The Freeing of God
Revisiting the Gospels
as our years go by

The Gospel of John



Patrick Oliver

THE FREEING OF GOD

Revisiting the Gospels as our years go by

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***Dedicated to all those with whom I've been blessed
to accompany and be accompanied by
through my ministry over the last thirty years***

Theme image: Open birdcage image sourced from Clker.com

PREFACE

The inspiration for this book came from our fortnightly scripture reflection group, which has met faithfully for some years now. At each meeting, Jenny, Sally, Arlie, Kylie and I (as well as others who could occasionally come along) would take the following Sunday's gospel as it occurs in the lectionary, and sit with it contemplatively, to see what it would say to each of us. Each person in the group brought their own experiences of being brought up in a Christian tradition, and reactions to the passages would vary – sometimes it was like meeting again an old friend, and sometimes it was like bumping into passages that criticized and condemned.

Feelings of guilt and fear would surface from time to time, and it would seem to some of us that so much of the scriptures were soaked in a morality that trumpeted a God of rectitude, a deity whose voice through the years became mixed with those of other significant others, to form a superego which could never be satisfied. Step by step, the group remained faithful to contemplating the scriptures from a prayerful and reflective space, and their sharing became the inspiration for this book.

As the decades roll by, we can be gifted with the discovery of new vistas and perspectives which previously had been unfamiliar to us. This growth isn't so much chronological but developmental; there are plenty of people in their late twenties who can understand life far better, it seems, than some folk in their sixties who are still playing the games of those in their twenties and thirties. What might be some characteristics of those who have let life circumstances teach them?

The great teacher in life is, unfortunately, failure. It spares none of us, yet we have the constant choice to bury it, deny it or let it tutor us about what's important, what's valuable, and what's lasting. Failure rips off the false self, which can be a name for the endless disguises of the ego that will go to extraordinary lengths in order to prove itself, promote itself or protect itself.

The false self is never happy and is ever restless, for it incessantly craves to know that it's in control, loveable or secure. Those who let the years teach them can learn to trust that if they let go this false self, then they fall into a life much deeper, larger and richer than what they could have ever constructed.

A second characteristic of these spacious and gracious people is that they notice in themselves a capacity to hold paradox. That is, it's no longer a surprise to them that they are mixtures of both darkness and light; that they can be loving one moment and then indulge the next; that they can be courageous and wise one moment and then hesitant; that they can be sagacious one moment and imprudent the next; that they can be striving for the good and the true in one second, and then captured by compulsion in the next. These people are at home in their own skin, for they know they'll never "have it together" – since they know there's no such thing. At least on their better days, they remember that life is a mixed bag: they're aware that they carry their amalgam of sharp edges with a wisdom that can forgive reality and themselves for not being perfect.

A third characteristic is a capacity to let woundedness be a source of compassion and mercy, rather than letting it turn into a toxic pool of bitterness and resentment. No one escapes being wounded; in fact we can't really start relating honestly until we've come to an awareness of our woundedness. In this litigious society, it's become easy to blame another for how one's life has turned out, and unfortunately this fault-finding can get into the very cells of our bodies after a while. It is a tasty temptation to find someone to blame so we can gain a perverse pleasure from holding onto an identity as "the one who's been wronged".

It's my deep conviction that the Gospel speaks to the heart of being human. Even more, I believe that being honestly human is the only way to encounter a God who Christians name as God-made-flesh. The way into the heart of God is through the heart of being truly human, and being truly human necessarily means being earthly converted through the experiences of failure, renewal, rejection, love, struggle and graciousness.

THE FREEING OF GOD: The Gospel of John

I hope that this book will help readers to discover their own life as the sacred story. The Word is not a word; the Word is flesh, the Word is blood and guts, and the Word takes the risk of being truly human. For being truly human brings the realization of being held within the truly Godly.

This book doesn't pretend to be a commentary or a translation of the scriptures. Rather, it is a collection of reflections that have come to me as I've sat with the gospels over the years.

I hope these reflections can be of help for you in your prayer. What follows in this book is a summation of Gospel thoughts that I've mulled over since I was a little boy. What follows isn't the last word, nor is it the most rigorous in terms of nuances of translation. It's not a scholarly work – far from it – but hopefully it has eventuated as a labour of love that invites the soul to dance with the God who woos.

This year marks thirty years for me since the commencement of public ministry. To all those who've helped me appreciate these riches – thank you.

Patrick



Chapter Three

Nicodemus

Now one of the leaders among the Jewish people is a Pharisee named Nicodemus.² He's intrigued by Jesus' teachings, but because he's afraid of being discovered by the other Pharisees, he visits him by night.

One night he opens up to Jesus: 'Rabbi, we can see that your authority comes from the strength of your relationship with God, for no one could do such marvellous things unless that person is totally confident that God's with them!'

³ Jesus answers him,

'Nicodemus, it's not about whether I do spectacular stunts!
Rather, it's about whether you're drawing your life
from the One from whom I draw my energy and love!
Let me emphasize that no-one can see reality truly
unless they let themselves be taken into the Great Pattern,
the signature tune of all creation.

'If you're to live as I live, you have to shed over and over again
the layers that protect you from consciously engaging
with the beautiful and broken nature of life,
so you can see more clearly the radical and ravishing God.
I'm not talking about belonging to the right tribe
or having quick and holy-sounding answers to everything;
I'm talking about shedding what you think you can't do without.
I'm inviting you to be born again and again –
otherwise you just can't love truly!'

⁴ Nicodemus becomes puzzled by this talk of rebirth, and asks, 'But when you're born, you're born; how can you do it all again? What strange ritual are you talking about when you say we have to get inside our mothers and be born again? I don't understand you!'

⁵ Jesus answers:

'Well, let me express it differently.
The first step in being transformed is to say yes
to new conduct and morality;
this is what John's been doing in his baptism by water.
The next step is to learn how to inhale the breath of the Spirit
who takes you into the intimacy of the very heart of God,
where you become co-creators and co-lovers!'

God needs uninhibited lovers
if the divine hope for the world is to become flesh –
and you can't be part of the Great Love Affair
if you don't know how to let go by forgetting yourself,
and surrendering into the pattern
that takes you through your many deaths and into a new life
which you haven't generated or engineered.

'If you really think your worth is gauged by your possessions, your poverty,
your reputation, your successes, your failures, your achievements,
your hopelessness, your holiness, your amount of prayers,
your worthiness, your unworthiness, or whatever –
then your soul hasn't blossomed or been born anew one iota!
Life's remained on the numbing level of "how am I doing?"
rather than "what's God bringing to birth within me and around me?"

⁶ 'This is what I mean when I say that
what's born of the flesh is flesh, and what's born of the Spirit is spirit!
You know who you really are only through being in relationship,
not through trying to continually prove yourself to yourself.
If you exist on this level of self-sufficiency
and you're seeking to perpetually protect yourself,
you're dead already;
if you desire to live on the level of communion and love-relationship,
then you're letting the Spirit blow through you –
and you're eternal already!

***"Just as wind can't not blow
and water can't not flow,
so God can't not love"***

⁷ 'Are you surprised how I stress
that you have to be born again and again?
It isn't about stage-managing your life, Nicodemus,
and it's especially not about trying to control the elusive chameleon Spirit!
God's on the make for people with whom to make love,
and you can't manipulate the movement of the Spirit.

⁸ Just as wind can't not blow and water can't not flow,
so God can't not love.
Keep saying yes to the ultimate love-affair,
and you're assenting to a life that's uncharted,
unpredictable and unsettling ...
but utterly sheltered, totally secure and sublimely sacred!'

THE FREEING OF GOD: The Gospel of John

⁹ Incredulous, Nicodemus probes Jesus, ‘But how can a person come to live like this?’ ¹⁰ And Jesus replies,

‘You’re supposed to be a teacher of Israel;
why is it you can’t see what’s so evident
through all the great themes of scripture?
The scriptures describe Israel’s gradual journey
into coming to know a gracious God
who invites all into the radical freedom of loving deeply.

‘You know when you’ve been born again when you’ve decided to love
when there’s no reason to continue loving;
you know it when you’ve made a decision
with which others don’t agree,
but you make it because deep in your soul
you know you must decide this way;
you know it when you’ve persevered
even when there’s no applause for doing so;
you know it when you’ve remained silent
rather than given into verbal violence;
you know it when you’ve spoken out
rather than given into corrosive self-pity.

‘You know you’ve been born again
when you’ve been seized by the power of the Great Love
which absorbs and caresses you within your spaces of self-hatred;
you know it when you can love the unlovable
and can touch the untouchable.
That’s what our scriptures have been leading us towards!

***“When you’ve been born again,
you can love the unlovable
and touch the untouchable”***

¹¹ ‘Believe me,
I share what I’ve experienced of our gracious God’s tenderness,
and both my Father and I hold to the truth of this forever-love.
Why then do you struggle to accept it?

¹² If you can’t see the reality of God’s Spirit
when the lives of people around you are radically transformed,
then how will you be able to trust the unseen reality of Love?
If you’re not prepared to be open to the world of spirit,
then what I’m speaking about here will remain pure nonsense!

THE FREEING OF GOD: The Gospel of John

¹³ 'In my life and death, I as the Son of Man, the truly Human One, will reveal the human face of God, and as I let my life be taken away from me, you'll come to see who God really is and who you really are. 'I shall be for you a transparent icon of God, so no one need be reticent again about drawing close to the One who first draws close to you. I'll show in the way I go through my death that there's nothing to fear in God!

¹⁴ Remember when Moses lifts up the bronze serpent in the wilderness, and all those afflicted with snakebite are healed just by looking at it?

¹⁵ Well, you too can be restored and transfigured as you gaze upon the Mystery of Love poured out in total acceptance and forgiveness.

¹⁶ 'Because God loves you and the entire creation so truly and totally, God becomes embodied love: weak, vulnerable and susceptible flesh. I am this flesh, and I'm given to you so you can trust that I embody what it is to be totally human and totally divine.

'Believe me, I long to wake you up to knowing who you really are: you and all people have divine blood flowing through you, for you all no less than I are adult children of the Divine! You never can be forgotten, you never can be rejected, and you never can be abandoned! I will show in my very body that God's fondness for you will never perish, and that this fondness is forever. Whether or not you're aware of it, it's with this Eternal Love that you love anyone – and in this love, you become eternal!

“You and all people have divine blood flowing through you – for you all, no less than I, are adult children of the Divine”

¹⁷ 'I don't come among you to condemn you: heaven knows you do enough of this through your self-hate, self-loathing and self-criticism! Of course when you exist in such a state, you're bound to export it onto others around you, and so in turn you hate, loathe and criticize them.

THE FREEING OF GOD: The Gospel of John

'I come not to condemn,
but to demonstrate through totally non-violent relationship with you
that God can never be violent towards you!
There's no blindness, sin or stupidity
that can drain the font of mercy and compassion in which you're held.

'You're saved from having to make yourself lovable,
for you're already in the divine nest and you can't fall out of it.
Truly, that's Good News! Truly, that's being saved!
To "believe in me" is to live
from within this same radical trust within which I live!
To "be saved" is to receive the gaze of the One to whom you belong,
and what matters is the love that sustains me and can sustain you.

Yet this experience isn't so you can keep it in a glass case,
perfectly preserved from blemish and bruising;
you're saved so your life can be spent in service,
graciously poured out for the life of the world.

¹⁸ 'If you live this way, you'll find there's nothing to dread in God.
You won't grow rancid with self-judgment,
you won't become toxic
through disparaging and denigrating everybody else,
and you won't be petrified that God will be like all those people
who've criticized and condemned you in years gone by.

'But if you don't desire to live from within this One Love,
then you'll most certainly become rabid
with censure and condemnation.
You won't go five minutes
before you're captured by carping and complaining –
all because you can't let yourself be loved and held in the way that I,
who let the resonance of this divine love permeate my being,
can let myself be loved and held by God.
To "have faith" in me
is for you to live the faith I have in my *Abba* Father's faithfulness!

¹⁹ 'Yes, God judges you,
but it's not a legally-based judgment
which metes out punishment for wrongdoing,
so God can get some kind of warped satisfaction from seeing you suffer.
God's judgment isn't about condemnation,
but about telling you who and Whose you really are.
Such absolute, unconditional and indescribable love
challenges you to be totally naked
before the One who knows you completely –

THE FREEING OF GOD: The Gospel of John

for the One who knows you completely loves you completely,
and reveals the truth of yourself to you!
'Now if you've spent your energies
trying to dress yourself up by perpetually proving
how good or bad, right or wrong, virtuous or repulsive you are,
then it becomes too scary to be honest!
So you'll flee from the light of too much love,
and make life all about your achievements or lack thereof,
with no room for love from anyone else!

***“Many would be prefer to remain
in charge than to be in love”***

²⁰ 'Many would prefer to remain in charge than to be in love,
and they'd prefer to be right
than to enter into deep, intimate and prayerful relationship
with the One who holds them in loving delight.
But if you've let your brokenness take you
into recognizing how good God is,
then there's nothing to fear;
you can let love's healing light search you and know you
in your beauty *and* your brokenness, your hurt *and* your hope!

²¹ 'So if you desire to live honestly and humbly
by letting life's circumstances teach you
about mercy, forgiveness and hope,
then you're living in solidarity with God's light of love –
whether you're aware of it or not.
You're an icon of God,
a human face of the divine shining forth for the world!'

