The Fifth Freedom

For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will save it. What good is it for a man to gain the whole world and yet lose or forfeit his very self. (Lk. 9:24-25)

On a wall of my office hangs a print of Norman Rockwell's iconic paintings memorializing Franklin Roosevelt four freedoms speech. Roosevelt gave the address to Congress in early January 1941, shortly after winning election to his third term as President. In the speech, the President outlined four fundamental freedoms that every human being ought to enjoy:

- Freedom of speech and expression;
- Freedom to worship God in one's own way;
- Freedom from want, which meant an economic understanding ensuring a healthy peacetime life for all people;
- Freedom from fear, which meant worldwide reduction in armaments and guarantees against nations committing acts of aggression against their neighbors.

As I ponder the relevance of this to our age, I find myself yearning for a fifth panel to my print—freedom from the sovereign self.

Cultural critics of our day have described modern society as "the age of the self". They have focused on our narcissistic tendencies, our self-obsession, our hyper-individualism. We are the sole source of our own code of ethics, our own authority, the captains of our ships. We are the sole decider of what is right and wrong for ourselves. Our modern mass media and our consumer digital culture are dominated by our personal brands, our "selfies" and self-promotion, our self-actualization, and an inward-looking focus on our identity. Social platforms are designed to turn private life into a public persona, one of our making and to our liking. Community obligations have taken a backseat to personal fulfillment and individual pursuits. Our ever-loosening social structures place the burden of meaning and personal validation entirely on ourselves. Rather than freeing us, the "age of the sovereign self" traps us in unsustainable cycles of isolation and contrived self-identity. In our self-exaltation, we ultimately destroy ourselves.

Our disposition of sin in its essence is not immorality or other forms of wrong-doing. Those things are outcomes from the inner disposition. The driving disposition is selfishness, our self-realization apart from all else, or our right to ourselves. The essence of our waywardness is the self turned in on itself. We become our own little gods. This disposition may work out in sanctimonious external morality or in gross, greedy immorality, but its common denominator is our self-absorption. Who will rescue us from ourselves?

The heartbeat of Christianity is that I deliberately sign away my own rights and follow the Lord Jesus. I must be broken of this stubborn determination to actualize myself, to vindicate myself, to exalt myself, to pity my "sad, sweet self". I must sign over the "rag" rights of my natural life before the reality of my identification with the Lord Jesus can begin to transform me. He doesn't just patch up our lives, He makes them new. The Holy Spirit begins His new creation in us and the old solemnity goes away. God draws us to recognize our innate disposition, the disposition of our right to ourselves, the incubator of our self-sovereignty, the central citadel of our self-absorbed obstinacy. He beckons us away to a disposition that Jesus rules.

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O Lord, teach us to understand that your Son died to save us,
less from suffering than from ourselves,
less from injustice than from being unjust.
Forgive and transform us.
Christ died that we may live—but live as he lives
by dying as he died—who died to himself.
(George MacDonald)

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