

Three Nails and a Hammer

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Life as a Slave

I stumbled through a crowd of my accusers, as they laughed at me and spat in my face. Their voices were a dissonant blur, as one foul hiss was followed by another. My eyes were clamped shut and my head was bowed, as I ducked abuses and spittle.

Eventually my bands were tugged and I stood before a pedestal. Above me was a tall, broad-shouldered man with jet black hair and eyes of coal. It was my master. As always, he was clad in ebony, and rather than douse the inferno that encompassed me, he kindled it with every evil word. I could feel the rising heat as he voiced my judgment and sentence. The flames were licking me as he spoke.

But I could not listen, for I knew all too well that I was damned. I was to die as countless others before me. I have been a slave now all of my life, and I've known no other existence but to strive continuously to no end.

Life as a slave is a bitter night; it lingers endlessly without the prospect of dawn. Freedom is an unobtainable rarity, a stranger to me. I have never known it. Even as I think of it now, I don't know exactly what it is. Pleasant fields, I guess, cool winds, and still waters. All of these have been in dreams of mine, but I will never live to see them, for my freedom has been detained from birth for the cause of chains. Those chains speak now of my end, and I must say that I'm glad to see it. Yet I'm afraid that as I have survived this hell, I shall endure another.

It pains me now to know that my life will be counted for nothing. I have come to the base of my wick, and none of my light has escaped the bushel. It has been snuffed out as my flame altogether. What a waste

of time and life; for what use have I been to burn all of these years? My wick would have served the same purpose if it had been extinguished at birth, for I shall pass on without ever knowing liberty. I shall pass on as a slave to this fiend before me.

I could hear the master now, as the masses had hushed. His voice was a twisting sword in my gut, as he spoke of me. "Ah yes, what a sight we have here — another hopeless fool who has destined himself for destruction."

Although I hated to hear it, I knew it was true. I had not chosen the life of slavery, but I had destined myself to destruction, for I stood accused of aiding a fallen slave. He collapsed under the weight of our daily burdens, and I rushed to his side to help him; but it was too late, for he had already surrendered to death, and I, in the process, had secured my own.

Everyone knew the slave law. It was chiseled into our minds. We were forced to chant it every hour. "I will keep to myself! I will not say a word! I will always obey my master!" I knew the slave law too well, but I ignored it that day.

I had shattered the slave standard indeed, without a thought of myself. When I ran to the one who had fallen, I even whispered a few words before he died. In the sorrow of the moment, I disobeyed the command to rise to my feet. I had made an exception for this one slave, and in that decision, I defied my master. That choice would cost me my life. As I said before, I had destined myself to destruction.



I would have endured the whip had I just run to him. I would have taken a beating and a month in the pit had I simply spoken the words. But no, in my disobedience, I ensured the worst — my death. I was to be hung on a cross, displayed before my master and his associates as a prize, and before the other slaves as an example.

So why would I risk my life for this one slave? He was my father. I would not let him depart from me without telling me of my end, and, thus, I whispered in his ear, "Is there not more to this life? Is there not an end to this hell?" As he breathed his last, I repeated those words until the demons detained me. I was no longer whispering but shouting from the depths of my soul. "Is there not an end to this hell? Tell me, is there not an end to it!"

The answer came as they held my face in the dirt, "No, there isn't."

Chains of Death

Now I stood condemned because of that fateful day. The cross was before me and my master uttered a eulogy. "This slave, who stands before us, is bound by manacles that represent his life, chains that have constrained him since birth, chains that will lead him to his death!

"The shackles on his feet are a symbol that he is mine! They are the marks of his owner and the brand of his master. They have kept him from making great strides in this life, and the shortened links have caused him to stumble when he's run from me. He has always been, and he always will be, in death, my property. The cuffs that bind his wrists are a sign of his sin, for he has broken the slave law in every way. He has erred against his master and these beloved here, and his hands shall be free no more but to cling to his cross. Oh, and the manacle about his neck — 'tis the bridle that leads him to death, for by his own choice has he destined



himself to this end, and thus shall he lose the freedoms of this life."

When he said the word "freedoms," I shook my head, for what freedoms had I enjoyed but the freedom to die a death that lasts the years of life? This cross would only end my torment. It would be the symbol of my freedom, for I would escape this demon's lair. But what was the use, for even in death, as my master said, I would be a slave.

"What say you, masters of this world? What is to be done with one who scoffs at the law?"

Although I knew what the answer would be, it frightened me when I heard the response. "Crucify him. Crucify him." My owner rallied them all behind him and called them to shout it. "Crucify him," they hollered in vileness and hatred. The crowd was now a blood-thirsty brood, pushing and hitting me.

I fell to my knees to escape the onslaught, but it was to no avail. In seconds, I was seized on both sides and hurled to the foot of the cross. I knew then that I had come to my end, for I was to be offered as a sacrifice to the gods of slavery, who stirred now with punitive passion. With incredible speed, the executioners had my back against the wood, as countless splinters burrowed into my calloused skin. My shackles were left untouched, for I was to die in my chains, a foreshadowing of the slave life I would lead hereafter.

The Hooded Man

At the very moment when my hands were thrust to the board, when the hammer was raised and the nail was positioned, there came a voice from out of the jeering crowd that was clearer than all others, "Natas! Release him!" With that utterance, mouths were gaped and heads were bobbing to get a glimpse of the man who would dare use the master's name so openly.

My owner quickly left my side and pushed his way to the pedestal once more. Once above the pressing crowd, he could see it making way for a hooded figure. Then with a curled lip, the master said, "Who is this man that dares defy me? Let him come here and kneel."

The hooded man hurried not his walk nor offered any urgency in his step. His solemn stride seemed to unravel the master step by step.

"Who are you that dares interfere with this trial?" he said. "Hasten now to show yourself." The hooded man still made no concession to my owner, as if he were not impressed with his power in these parts. Finally, as the master was losing his patience, the man drew back his cloak and revealed his face. There was a collective gasp that was punctuated by that of the master of slaves. "You!"

The two men exchanged glares that told two tales. My owner seemed to stew in distant thought, as if reminiscing about some forgotten event, while his brow reflected the evil that boiled in his veins. The newcomer stood in confidence and even smirked, seemingly untouched by the fiendish ghouls around him. "You don't belong here," my master said. "What do you want?"

"You're right, Natas. I don't belong here, except for the cause of this man."

"What," exclaimed the bewildered master. "What interest have you in a condemned slave?"

"I heard your judgment of this man, Natas, and it was correct. This man does, in fact, belong to you. He has erred by the law, and he has chosen his own path to this death."

The stranger was interrupted. "So then, tell me, why have you come?"

"Because, Natas, you have no right to execute him." My master began to appear uncomfortable. He loosened his collar and cleared his throat. "And why don't you explain how I, the owner of this slave, have no right to end his service here."

In the pause of the next minute, the stranger turned to view the crowd, which had backed away from him as if he had the plague. His eyes pierced the hearts of each man and woman and found no benevolent thought, only cruel and wicked hearts. Then, his stare came to rest on me.

My mind quickly loosed its questions. What must he be thinking? What did he find in me? Nothing good, I thought, for I had never known life apart from the dregs of slavery. I am worthless, a lowly beggar, a condemned sinner!

But, in that brief interlude, I felt the stranger reach within and unlock the prison within me. I could not look away. I would not. The fear and desperation that had so long engrossed my heart was peeling away by the hope evident in him. I felt strangely changed, although I certainly looked the part of a slave about to die.

Suddenly, he turned back to the man who was once my owner. "Natas, you have no right to kill this man, and I'll tell you why." Beads of sweat began to surface on the brow of the man who claimed supremacy in this land. I had never seen him nervous before.

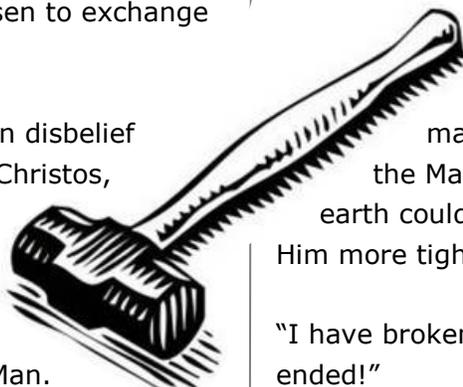
The Commutation Clause

"In your haste to condemn this man by the law, Natas, you failed to mention the recently appointed clause. Shall I remind these bewitched to what I am referring?" The master of slaves said nothing but stared down his nose, silently threatening the courageous stranger. "Of course, I shall remind them."

The once hooded man turned again to the shaken crowd. He was gaining momentum with every word. "The addition to the law, of which I am referring, is known as the *commutation clause*. It states: 'There are no grounds for condemnation for those who belong to Me, for the new law of life in Me releases those that are Mine from the old slave law of sin which leads to death.' What this means is simply that no master or minion of this world can touch this man." He pointed to me and tears welled up in my eyes. The events unfolding were beyond my understanding.

A series of scenes from the next few moments still flood my mind, and all of them were stirred by the catalyst of the next statement, when the hooded man said, "I have chosen to exchange My life for his."

The master of slaves growled in disbelief and then grunted, "Very well, Christos, have it Your way. If You wish to die, then You shall. Seize Him!" In less than a blink, I was removed from the cross and replaced by this merciful Man.



Three Nails and a Hammer

I was in such a state of gratitude and shock that my mind could not form words. I said nothing. I thought nothing. I could only fall to the ground and weep.

Three nails and a hammer were brought to bear, as the executioners stripped this Man of His cloak and strapped Him to the wood. In the midst of the struggle, His eyes were on me, yet I could not look on Him for my sobbing.

How could I let this Man die for me? What had I done to deserve this grace? Nothing. I could think of nothing. This Man was innocent and yet I was to live? No! I would not allow it. This would not be done!

Still on my knees and bound by my chains, I began to shout, but the maddened crowd snuffed every word. People were pressing me as they surrounded the cross. Each dastardly demon was thirsty for blood and voicing his hatred of the cursed clause. Still, despite the mayhem, I could see those eyes staring at me, undoing all of my personal horrors.

Every fiber of my being, every cell of my body impelled me to crawl to the cross and cling to this Man. I could not let Him die for me. As the first nail was readied and the hammer was raised, I shouted as loud as I could, "This is not right! I am the sinner! I must be punished!"

"No," He said. "You are forgiven." At the clang of the hammer, He screamed in agony. The chains about my wrists were loosed. The slave master commanded me to release the Man on the cross, but no force on earth could remove me just then. I gripped Him more tightly.

"I have broken the law! My life must here be ended!"

He would not have it. "Your life has just begun," He said. Another ping of the hammer and the manacle about my neck dropped to the ground. Again, my slave master ordered me to desist and release the bloody Man, but I was not about to let Him go. This Man, who had so kindly taken my place, was now writhing in pain as the third and final nail was imminent.

"I am a slave!" I shouted. "Here is my master! He bids me what to do!"

"Not any more," He said. "You are free!" The shrill of the final shot of that evil mallet was deafening. As the hooded Man endured the blow, the shackles about my feet fell slack and so did my clamp on the cross.

A New Master

Immediately, I was thrown at the feet of the ravenous crowd, back flat in the dust at the hooves of the howling wolves. The image I saw next was one I would never forget. Christos was suddenly raised on the cross, which was dropped into a readied hole.

What a devastating, traumatizing picture, a memory that is replayed in my mind in sluggish frames. Blood flowed from the wells of His veins and glistened in the sunlight. Three pallid spikes strained against sinew and bone, fusing together flesh and wood, but my Master was strong.

I could see His eyes and they were still fixed on me. His life was all but over. His breath all but gone, yet He uttered these words, "There *is* more to life. There *is* an end to this hell and it is Me."

As the breath of that final phrase escaped His bleeding mouth, He collapsed and spoke no more. He was dead.

I can't say that I recall much after that. I was so exhausted mentally and physically that I wavered in and out of consciousness. The once writhing mob dissolved quickly into peaceful waves, returning to their mundane sea of slave mastery. I did not move. My eyes were glued to the crucifix, the symbol of my recent liberty. My life under the slave law was now nailed before me. It was as dead as was the Savior who took my place, and I sat in the dust a free man.

After a lengthy review of those liberating scenes, I stood to my feet. My first impulse was to walk to the cross and look on the Man who paid my debt to death. I was overcome with emotion, and I could not help but to reach out and embrace His lifeless body.

"Thank You," I said softly. "I did not deserve this, and I don't know why You came for me, but I thank You."

Life as a Freeman

As I slowly released my Redeemer, I heard a voice in the wind, "I have set you free. Now, you are free indeed. Go and be a slave no more."

I stepped back and dried my tears, only to see that I was soaked in blood — marks from the sacred cross which stood now as a beacon of my hope.

As I turned to leave, I was startled by the master of slaves. He stood before me with hate in his eyes and revenge on his brow. I knew not what to say or what to do, so I stood in peace. Strangely, I was not afraid of him. The words of Christos echoed in my mind, "No master or minion of this world can touch those who belong to Me." But, the man in black was undaunted. He attempted to frighten me one last time.

As an act of ill-will, he dropped the bloody hammer at my feet and said these words in my ear, "You will always be a worthless slave."

He brushed my shoulder as he walked by, doing his best to intimidate me; but, it didn't work. He knew as well as I did that I was free from his power and that there was nothing he could do about it.

If anything, the slave master encouraged me in his malice, by giving me the very mallet that had crucified my Savior. For now I had a reminder of the price of my freedom, the penalty under which I was subject and the exchange of life that was offered in my place.

Yes, with this hammer I would never forget Christos and His act of love. I would never forget. I looked over my shoulder once more and gripped the gift in my hand. I would use it to tell others of the Man who died for me. Christos, the Savior of slaves, the Redeemer of the dead, the Release of captives, and the Way of life.

With hammer in hand, I turned and took my first step into freedom, a life without chains. It was unfamiliar to me, to say the least; but, it was freedom, for I had never known it. It felt as if I were a new being who had never lived a day as a slave, who had never donned the manacles of depression, and who had never groveled at the feet of demons.

The fields were pleasant, the winds were cool, and the waters were still. Yes, I was free, free because of three nails and a hammer.

I vowed that day, in honor of Christos, to break the slave law the rest of my life. I never kept to myself but reached out to others in mercy, as He had done for me. I never remained silent, but, rather, I spoke of Him to whomever would listen. I never obeyed my slave master again, for I had a new authority, and my life was His, bought by His blood.

Ever since that blessed day, I have never returned to that place. But I have heard tales of a hooded Man who survived the cross only to set countless other captives free. I know that without a doubt it was Christos.