

"The Freedom That Will Not Be Let Go Of"

Romans 8:31–39

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1) In the time when universities were shaken by the student movement before the 1970 security treaty, and classes were not even held, I was spending nihilistic days without expecting anything. At that time, my supervising professor gave me a small booklet, *Wo zo leben*. And he said, "This is a verse from a song that Jews sang in Nazi Germany's concentration camps. It would be good to remember it," and taught me these words. That was "*Wir wollen trotzdem Ja zum Leben sagen*" (*Even so, let us say Yes to life*).

2) That song is *Buchenwaldlied* (*Song of Buchenwald*). It was a song that was written, composed, and sung in 1938 in the Buchenwald concentration camp in the southern part of former East Germany.

Nazi Germany, led by Hitler, carried out mass genocide of Jews as a systematic national policy (the Holocaust). In concentration camps, they carried out an extermination policy through forced labor. Forced labor, malnutrition, hunger, disease, massacre, human experimentation. Those who could no longer work were sent to gas chambers.

3) The choice left for Jews was the two options: forced labor like slaves or death in the gas chambers. In such circumstances, what meaning does life have? What can one expect from life? Even so, they sang to say Yes to life.

4) What is it that makes our lives meaningful, valuable?

Victor Frankl's *Man's Search for Meaning*.

One is a creative life as an active life. By engaging in creative activity, one gives value to life. This includes all actions that bring joy and inspiration to others through better results (agriculture, manufacturing, commerce, education, sports, art).

The second is discovering value in life through experiencing something in a passive life. Beautiful nature, music, art, delicious meals, travel to unknown places, etc.

5) But when these two ways of living become impossible, how can one still find meaning and value in life?

What if one becomes bedridden due to a traffic accident, or develops ALS, or must

live through disaster, suffering, or adversity?

Suffering and adversity are part of life—just like fate and death, they cannot be avoided. A life without suffering or death is not complete as a life. If life has meaning, then even in suffering, adversity, and death, it must still have meaning.

6) In *Man's Search for Meaning*, Frankl writes:

“Anyone who has experienced a concentration camp knows the image of a person walking through the barracks speaking kind words here, giving away the last piece of their bread there. And even if such people were few, they show that everything can be taken from a person but one thing: the last of human freedoms—to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances.”

Each day and each hour in the camp gave the opportunity for this internal decision and choice. That inner decision and choice was whether or not to have one's inner freedom and dignity taken, whether or not to become a slave or victim of the situation or circumstance.

7) Frankl calls this *value through attitude*.

A meaningful life is not only one where value is realized through creative living or through the experience of beauty in art or nature. Even a life where such opportunities are almost nonexistent still has something that gives meaning.

That is: even when one's existence is forcefully restricted from the outside, one is given the freedom to decide what attitude to take toward such situations and environments. Not letting go of that freedom—therein lies human dignity.

8) The psychologist Skinner says, “Our lives are controlled by environmental conditions. The environment determines human behavior” (environmental determinism).

Certainly, there is such an aspect. But it is not everything.

We say “No.”

It is true we cannot choose our circumstances or environment. But we can choose how to respond to those circumstances. We must never let go of that freedom. It must not be taken from us.

To live is to be questioned—and to respond.

9) Human dignity can be experienced through how deeply one feels that one's decision or choice makes a difference—creates value—in one's own life, in the lives of others, and in the world.

10) Sometimes people accuse others saying, "Why do you say or do something that makes me angry?" or "You disappointed me!"

But that is not strictly correct.

Because by saying so, you are declaring that you (the other person) are determining my response, my life, my self.

That is a lie!

11) "No matter how unavoidable the fate or circumstances are, and no matter the suffering and pain they cause, the way we take them upon ourselves, the way we respond to them—in other words, how we bear and carry our suffering and adversity as our own cross—opens up the possibility that, even in the most difficult situations, we can shape our lives meaningfully until the very last moment of life.

We must not let go of the freedom to choose that.

We must not let it be taken from us."

12) The children who come to Koinonia could not choose the environment in which they were born and raised.

Unsanitary living conditions, poverty, malnutrition, broken families, neglect, domestic violence, sexual violence, drugs, crime.

But how they respond to that adversity, how they live out of it, what kind of life they choose—that freedom is entrusted to their own decisions and choices.

We want to help with that.

13) As free individuals created in the image of God and intended by God, we want to help them find a pivot point in their lives, discover meaning in their lives, and grow as free persons—not as victims of any power or circumstance in this world, but as tough servants who do not lose the freedom to respond to any situation with a "Yes."

That is the resolve we have placed in our motto: *"I still say Yes to life."*

14) Why can we say Yes? What is the basis for it?

It is wonderfully declared in Romans 8:31–39.

Just reading it is enough.

Because we are given the conviction that nothing can separate us from the love of God revealed in Jesus Christ.