

**THE LAW OF LIBERTY  
VERSUS  
THE LAW OF LOVE**

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## The Law of Liberty Versus the Law of Love

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**K**neeling numb and exhausted beside her bed in the back bedroom, Nancy knew it was more than the surprise of finding the two men, Mehmet and Zeki, in the house a moment ago that was filling her with such dread. (That meant an implied rule had been broken!) It was also her sore throat, and the weight of deciding whether to leave the House of Ruth under the care of twenty-six-year-old Reyhan, or to close it while she was on the year's furlough slated to begin in just two weeks.

Dismantling their lovely home was the last thing forty-five-year-old Nancy wanted to do. It was her dream-come-true for needy Muslim women in this unevangelized Middle East city, a peaceful base for single women to receive something in Christ's name—used clothing and a cup of hot tea for the “bag ladies” combing the trash outside, a tape library of Bible stories and tracts for cautious distribution, prayer and Bible study, and even live-in discipleship for three of the five single women who had been baptized.

“Lord, help!” she prayed. “I’m so mixed up and angry. Customs *are* changing, but how fast, Lord? Is what my friends advised only eight months ago already outdated? . . . You know I *hate* having to enforce on these young believers the taboos of their own culture; that seems so wrong. Lord, show me if their rebellion is your way of smashing a burdensome rule that shouldn’t be. . . . But Lord, is it possible that you’re showing me what will happen to your name after I leave if their defiance isn’t dealt with?”

Everything had gone so well until now. Nancy had arrived four years before, wanting to establish a home for single women because she believed the gospel would spread quickly among independent and rejected women. The idea had come from her reading about Lydia, the woman at the well, the Magdalene, and the Macedonian slave girl. It was an unexplored concept. Her prayer partners at home caught her vision and had given financially so that she could open the first House of Ruth less than a year after her arrival in the Middle East.

That first year was grueling, but beautiful. Mene, a twenty-six-year-old divorcee, committed her life to Christ and moved in with Nancy. She grew strong in the Lord and was thrilled to have a place for sharing Christ with their neighbors, many of whom, like Mene, felt rejected by society due to divorce or separation. All who visited the two learned something of Jesus, usually for the first time, and nobody left without prayers.

When Mene's brother pleaded for her help with his failing business in another city, she left for one year. Nancy moved into a large apartment in a less-conservative neighborhood and continued the House of Ruth. For the past ten months she had roomed with Selma and Reyhan, two recent converts who had taken the step of baptism. Neither of the two had ever lived in such comfortable surroundings, or with Christians, and both gloried in their newfound freedom to minister openly to their friends at work and school. The three women's “family prayer times” had created close ties between them. Nancy was pleased to think she could leave the home under Reyhan's supervision while she was on furlough, although Mene often warned her, “Reyhan can't manage it. She's too stubborn.”

The “no-men-unless-accompanied-by-wives” rule for the House of Ruth was a long-standing one. Experienced missionaries had warned: “In this country, single girls should live with their parents if they are unmarried, so be absolutely certain you *never* entertain men or allow the women to do so.” Mene had agreed. Although the residents of the House of Ruth had bent the rule occasionally for brief chats with Christian “brothers” (with the front door opened wide, as is the Muslim custom for such emergencies), so far as Nancy knew, no neighbor had ever criticized “the *gavur*” (non-Muslims/ those who leave Islam) or “the foreign lady” (“everyone knows *all* Western women are immoral”). One neighbor had even told another that Nancy's companions were “pure girls.” This delighted her, for Nancy wanted to win her neighbors to Christ.

Reyhan thought the rule forbidding male visitors was needless, but both she and Selma had agreed to it before moving in the previous September. When winter cold closed the city's outdoor cafes, however,

and there seemed no place to gather after Sunday services, the women and several male converts, including Mehmet and Zeki, insisted that the rule was unnecessary. Mehmet had chided Nancy last fall, saying,

You misunderstand our people, Nancy. We are not such backward people as you think; this is a modern country. Your neighbors don't care what people do so long as they're polite. Besides, the women only want to entertain us *Christian men*, not Muslims. . . . Once we had to live under the harsh Muslim customs like this, but Jesus has set us free from the law. You urge us to love and trust one another, but you don't really trust us. How can we grow closer if we have no place to meet?

Nancy sympathized and hoped they were correct, but Mene insisted they were wrong. Not knowing what to believe or how to maintain unity without jeopardizing the House of Ruth's fine reputation, Nancy asked three non-Christian friends in the neighborhood how they would view the women's occasional entertaining of men. All three were in their early thirties and were considered "modern," having lived in America in recent years.

The first simply raised his eyebrows, a most emphatic way of saying, "No!"

"I say to hell with this sick society—let them do it, Nancy," fumed the second, a bachelor.

At that outburst, the third, an air-force major, bit his lip in the Muslim gesture that meant "Shame on you!" He added, "Why tell Nancy that? You know someone will call the police. Why, I probably would if they did it more than five times. I may be a modern man, but my wife and the neighbors are not. They'd call your ladies 'prostitutes.' No, Sister, never let those single women entertain men there."

When Nancy, Reyhan, and Selma could not agree on a policy, they agreed to abide by the decision of "the regulars." Since they were aware that, as "firstfruits," what each convert did very much affected the entire body, corporate decisions were encouraged. The decision of the five older members—four missionaries and Mene, who had recently returned from her brother's city—was a firm no. In the end, even Reyhan and Selma joined in to make the vote unanimous.

Winter passed without further incidents, and Nancy assumed the issue was dead. The women matured as a body, thanks to one couple's increased willingness to host the singles and to the added availability of their meeting hall.

Now it was June, and Nancy was hoping to leave everything to Reyhan and Selma while she was on furlough. Then, last night, she was surprised to find Reyhan, Selma, Mehmet, and Zeki praying with an

unfamiliar young woman in the living room with the door closed. All five had rushed to explain that the stranger had just confessed her faith in Christ. At this exciting news, Nancy had relaxed and enjoyed their brief visit.

But tonight was different. It began with an argument. "We've decided not to obey that silly rule, Nancy. We have been set free in Christ, and that means free to be ourselves," Reyhan had announced when she learned Nancy's sore throat would keep her at home that evening. "Jesus didn't worry about his neighbors, and neither should we. Besides, if we tell Selma's college friends about your rule, they'll mock Christianity and tell us it's as backward as Islam."

Nancy had pleaded: "But what about 1 Peter 2:12, where we're told to maintain good conduct among the Gentiles, so that when they spread stories about us as *gavur*, they will remember how honorably we live and someday give praise to God? We are warned never to give even the appearance of evil, Reyhan, so that we may win others to Christ. . . ." Reyhan had responded with well-chosen Scriptures of her own. Nothing was resolved, and silence hung heavily over the usually cheery apartment until the doorbell rang several hours later.

Nancy went to the door, and much to her dismay, there stood Mehmet and Zeki. Reyhan and Selma had invited them as guests for dinner! Angry, hurt, and embarrassed, Nancy had reminded all four of the fellowship's decision last fall, but none of them could even remember voting.

Not knowing what to say or do, Nancy had escaped to her bedroom. She wanted to climb into bed and nurse her sore throat and hurt feelings until morning. But the issue about male guests had to be resolved immediately, for with that rested the fate of the House of Ruth. Nancy prayed once more, "Oh, Lord, give us love. . . . Show us how to balance our liberty in you with your demands that we not cause others to stumble. And *please*, Lord, keep us from divisions between nationals and foreigners, young and old." She dried her eyes, opened her bedroom door, and walked down the hall toward the dining room where the four were seated.