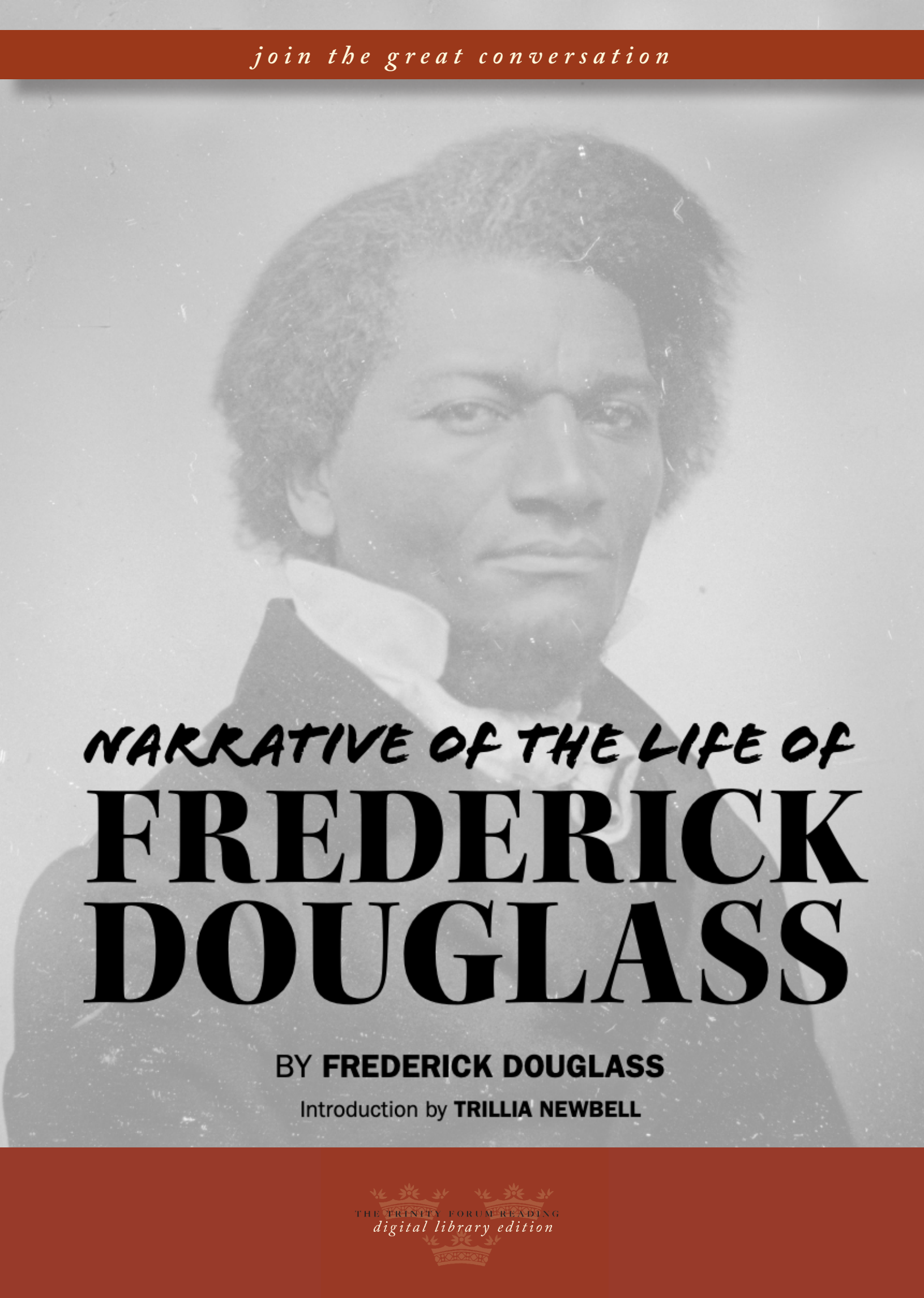


*join the great conversation*



***NARRATIVE OF THE LIFE OF***  
**FREDERICK**  
**DOUGLASS**

**BY FREDERICK DOUGLASS**

Introduction by **TRILLIA NEWBELL**

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Excerpts from the book *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* by Frederick Douglass. First published by the Anti-Slavery Office in Boston, MA in 1845. This work is now in the public domain.

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# INTRODUCTION

Frederick Douglass was a man who knew the power of words: the words of the discarded textbooks and stolen readers that first gave him the language to condemn slavery for the evil that it was; the words of the Bible, those rolling cadences in the King James that activated his mind and stirred his heart; the words of abolitionist newspapers, which, once free, he consumed with the hunger of a young man full of “holy fire.” Douglass learned early that well-chosen words, whether spoken or written, could move a person to righteous anger or make them break down in tears—and marshal resolve towards ending injustice. And so words became his vocation. They were his tools, and he was their master. “He wrote and spoke millions of words,” says his biographer, David Blight; “his trove of commentary contains beauty, brilliant story-telling, sermons, political stump speeches, and assaults on the mind that is his legacy and the essential reason we know him.”

Just who was Frederick Douglass? He was an activist, a publisher, a writer, and a prose poet. He was, for 20 years, enslaved in the American South. He was a tireless speaker and accomplished rhetorician. He was the most famous African American of his lifetime, well known not just in the United States but around the world. By the end of his life, he had the ear of presidents and politicians, and had held posts in the federal government. But Douglass was also a father, a husband, and a man who forever bore the scars of his traumatic past. *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* is his account of that trauma. Written by a master

storyteller, it is a tale meant to open the eyes and pierce the hearts of its readers.

### *Years in Bondage*

As I write this introduction, there are a few things I know about myself. I was born in North Carolina in 1978 and therefore I'm 42 years old. One of the most striking evidences of the sheer horror of slavery is in the opening of our reading:

I was born in Tuckahoe . . . in Talbot county, Maryland. I have no accurate knowledge of my age, never having seen any authentic record containing it. By far the larger part of the slaves know as little of their ages as horses know of theirs . . .


Christians believe that every person is made in the image of God (Genesis 1:27). This designation is not something manmade—God chose to create every person in every tribe, tongue, and nation in His image. Our value is rooted in the cosmic blessing of the Creator of the universe. To deny someone of the knowledge of their age, as if they were a mere farm animal, is one of the many atrocious acts of slavery. The psychological impact of a young boy feeling like an animal—the ones that God gave man dominion over—can only be compounded by being born into a system that allowed another person to own you.

Frederick Douglass was born Frederick Augustus Washington Bailey in Maryland around 1835. His mother was Harriet Bailey and his father is unknown, but presumed to be white and possibly his master. Douglass and his mother's six other children were taken from her at a young age. He reflected on his mother's state, "My poor mother, like many other slave women, had many children but no family!"

Separating families—men, women, and children—was customary practice during slavery. As a result of these separations, as well as the lack of record-keeping of slaves, many African Americans today cannot trace our ancestry. And we will never fully understand the depths of

the damage done to the families separated throughout the 400 years of slavery in the United States.

Despite this trauma, Douglass saw how a providential move changed his life. At the age of eight, he was loaned to a relative of his owner in Baltimore. He would later write, “It is possible, and even quite probable, that but for the mere circumstance of being removed from that plantation to Baltimore, I should have today, instead of being here seated by my own table, in the enjoyment of freedom and the happiness of home, writing this *Narrative*, been confined in the galling chains of slavery.” Baltimore was a world apart from the country plantations Douglass had known up to that point. At the time of his arrival, the bustling port city had a population of nearly 80,000 people, including more than 14,000 free blacks, the largest concentration of free persons of color in the United States, and a growing number of European immigrants. Thus Douglass was able to imagine a different way of being in the world. It was in Baltimore that Douglass learned to read, trading bread for lessons from some of the poor Irish immigrant children on his street, and it was in Baltimore that Douglass vowed he would not always remain a slave.

Unfortunately, when Douglass was about 15, his time in Baltimore was cut short. He was sent back to his owner, Thomas Auld, in rural Maryland, and from there was loaned to two other white farmers—one exceedingly cruel, the other less so but still unjust, and Douglass longed more than ever to be his own master. When he was 17 years old, Douglass and four friends planned an escape, only to be thwarted at the last moment. But instead of selling Douglass to the Deep South, as was customary with slaves who tried to fight for freedom, Thomas Auld decided to send Douglass back to his brother Hugh in Baltimore to learn a trade—another circumstance that would prove good in Douglass’s life. These improved circumstances did not satisfy him, however. A couple years later, with the help of a free black woman named Anna Murray, 20-year-old Douglass made his escape north. 



### *Frederick Douglass, the Free Man*

After arriving safely in New York disguised as a free black sailor, Douglass wrote to Murray, who joined him in New York. The two were married shortly thereafter and moved to Massachusetts to begin their new life. (It is at this point that Douglass's *Narrative* leaves off.) Anna Murray and Douglass would eventually have six children together, five of whom lived to adulthood. In New England, Douglass began to hone his oratory skills as a lay preacher for a local black congregation and became involved in abolitionist organizations. In 1841, he gave a stirring speech at the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society convention—another pivotal moment in his life. A week later, at the young age of 21, he was tapped to join the abolitionist speaking circuit, a role that would eventually carry him through all the northern states, from Maine to Michigan, as well as overseas to Ireland and Great Britain.

Douglass soon earned international fame as an abolitionist, author, orator, and editor. He wrote *Narrative*, the first of his three memoirs and a work of impressive literary skill, in 1844, when he was about 27 years old. In 1847, he started an abolitionist newspaper called the *North Star*, whose motto was “Right is of no Sex – Truth is of no Color – God is the Father of us all, and we are all brethren.” The paper was published in Rochester, New York, where Douglass and his family had moved, and eventually became one of the most influential abolitionist papers of its time.

One remarkable aspect of his freedom was Douglass's desire to change the narrative for all black people. He is known to be the most photographed American of the 19th century—a superlative which he cultivated. He believed that serious photographs of him could help counter ignorant and demeaning caricatures of black people. Racism has never been exclusive to the South; in the North he was forever fighting against patronizing stereotypes, as well as overtly hostile racism. In his many travels, he endured countless incidents of mistreatment and discrimination at the hands of hotel operators, train conductors, churches, and

violent mobs. In typical fashion, Douglass channeled his indignation over these injustices into rousing speeches and biting editorials.

Hand in hand with Douglass's activism was his deep grounding in the Bible, especially the Old Testament. He saw his own story and the story of African Americans reflected in the words of the Hebrew prophets. Upon gaining his freedom, he joined the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church, an independent black denomination that also was home to Sojourner Truth and Harriet Tubman, and became a licensed preacher in 1839. A deep and genuine faith informed his actions and his moral philosophy; he was a tireless critic of the hypocrisy he saw in many white churches.

The end of Douglass's life was notably hard. His Rochester home burned down in 1872, after which he moved to Washington, DC. Following the death of his wife Anna, he married a white woman named Helen Pitts, nearly 20 years his junior. This caused a lot of controversy, even in his progressive circles. Douglass responded to it by saying that his first marriage had been to someone the color of his mother and his second marriage to someone the color of his father. He also worked relentlessly, continuing to fill his calendar with speaking engagements, now, in the post-Civil War era, to decry the horrors of racism and the disintegration of Reconstruction. This tireless work was due to financial necessity as well as passion—much of his large extended family was still financially dependent on him.

On February 20, 1895, Douglass, ever an advocate for women's equality, attended the National Council of Women—a meeting held in Washington, DC. Upon his return, Douglass suffered a massive heart attack. He was 77. The next day, over the opposition of Southern members, the US Senate voted to adjourn out of respect for him. Douglass was buried in Rochester, next to his first wife Anna. Though he was dead, his words continued to reverberate in the next generation of African American activists, including Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. De Bois.

### *The Poison of Slavery*

One of the great themes of Douglass's *Narrative* is the way that slavery not only denied the humanity of black people but also stripped the humanity of the slaveowners—as he observed in his own masters. He wrote of his first owner, Aaron Anthony:

Master, however, was not a humane slaveholder. It required extraordinary barbarity on the part of an overseer to affect him. He was a cruel man, hardened by a long life of slaveholding. He would at times seem to take great pleasure in whipping a slave. I have often been awakened at the dawn of day by the most heart-rending shrieks of an own aunt of mine, whom he used to tie up to a joist, and whip upon her naked back till she was literally covered with blood . . . . The louder she screamed, the harder he whipped; and where the blood ran fastest, there he whipped longest.

Slavery didn't only abuse the slaves, it rotted the hearts of slaveowners. Douglass observed this firsthand when he moved to Baltimore. His new master's wife was initially kind, warm, and put young Frederick at ease by her demeanor. But as Douglass records, this didn't last long.

But, alas! this kind heart had but a short time to remain such. The fatal poison of irresponsible power was already in her hands, and soon commenced its infernal work. That cheerful eye, under the influence of slavery, soon became red with rage; that voice, made all of sweet accord, changed to one of harsh and horrid discord; and that angelic face gave place to that of a demon.

Although his story isn't focused on slaveowners, I don't want to miss these accounts. The damage of slavery goes deep into the souls



of the white men and women who sought to protect their power, property, and “way of life” without regard to the possibility of losing their souls. Douglass wanted you and me to read his words about the effects of slavery on owners for a reason. It causes me to pause and wonder what systems, policies, or ideologies might I be involved in that could be damaging to others—and also to me?

We often excuse certain participants of slavery, such as famous theologian Jonathan Edwards, as products of their times. But when we consider the effects of slavery, it’s hard to exonerate those who participated in it with this simplistic explanation. That doesn’t mean we can’t glean from the truth they preached, but let’s not excuse their sin. Physical, mental, and sexual abuse were a common experience for slaves at the hands of slaveowners. There have been attempts to whitewash the horrors of slavery and paint slaveowners as benevolent heroes supplying work for their captives. But Douglass sought to set the record straight, and provide, for those with eyes to see, a glimpse into the life of a slave that is neither humane nor good.

Douglass was especially exacting in his critique of any form of religion instrumentalized to excuse slavery, especially Southern Christianity. And he had good reason to be, as he had witnessed this hypocrisy many times first-hand. Almost all of his various masters claimed to be pious men, who attended church on Sunday and prayed to God for good health and good harvests. Indeed, after his master Thomas Auld attended a religious revival meeting and “converted,” Douglass observed him to be even more cruel, writing, “Prior to his conversion, [Thomas] relied upon his own depravity to shield and sustain him in his savage barbarity; but after his conversion, he found religious sanction and support for his slaveholding cruelty.” One of Douglass’s most-performed speeches was a satirical sermon which mimicked a Methodist preacher’s appeals to slaves to “obey your masters.”

This is perhaps the most troubling aspect of America’s slavery story: that slave owners would beat their slaves throughout the week and justify it under the eyes of God. But many who claim Christ have also

erroneously excused slavery, quoting texts such as Ephesians 6:5–9, the one to which Douglass referred in his “Slaveholders’ Sermon”:

Bondservants, obey your earthly masters with fear and trembling, with a sincere heart, as you would Christ, not by the way of eye-service, as people-pleasers, but as bondservants of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart, rendering service with a good will as to the Lord and not to man, knowing that whatever good anyone does, this he will receive back from the Lord, whether he is a bondservant or is free. Masters, do the same to them, and stop your threatening, knowing that he who is both their Master and yours is in heaven, and that there is no partiality with him. (ESV)

Slavery in the first century was not equivalent to the historical slavery of the modern world, however. In Greco-Roman culture, slaves were often considered a part of the household. So, in the context of Ephesians 6, it makes sense that the writer of the Book of Romans, Paul, would be addressing the relational aspect of the slave and master. Another distinction is that slavery in the ancient world was considered indentured servanthood and not based on race. These were temporary positions and not considered as a person owning another person. It is good to note also that Paul is not mandating slavery. He is, as he often does, exhorting the listeners in how they should relate to one another. He in no way commands or condones the system of slavery. Yet even today, there are those who attempt to justify slavery as “biblical.”

In stark contrast, these words by Douglass remind me of the Psalmists crying out in agony to the Lord:

O God, save me! God, deliver me! Let me be free! Is there any God? Why am I a slave? I will run away. I will not stand it. Get caught, or get clear, I’ll try it. I had as well die with ague as the fever. I have only one life to lose. I had as well be killed running

as die standing. Only think of it; one hundred miles straight north, and I am free! Try it? Yes! God helping me, I will.

One of the greatest tragedies of Douglass's story and that of all who endured the injustice of slavery was that many of those who led the charge to keep humans made in the image of God in chains were also professing Christians. It would be easy to point the finger and assume we'd never do such a thing in the name of Jesus. But we can all be tempted to distort truth for our own selfish gain. Slavery, of course, is an extreme example, but it's worthwhile to ask where we might change truth.

It is all too easy, as we read Douglass's account, to assume we know how we would respond during his time. We are all the hero in our minds. And hopefully each reader would have joined the abolitionist movement. But if we desire to truly grow as we read, we'll ask deeper questions of ourselves. Why did so few Christians in the South criticize, much less overtly oppose, slavery? How did consciences grow so calloused? How was wickedness justified, institutionalized, even celebrated? What price would a critic have paid? How did the teachings of Jesus become so perverted as to be enlisted to protect the oppressor, rather than the oppressed? What caused and continued such widespread and deeply entrenched moral blindness? And what current injustices might we even now be unwilling to see for what they are? These are questions we can ask.

The faith and hope-filled cry of Douglass led him to fight his way to freedom. *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* continues to educate us about the real lives of slaves, their owners, and their faith. Let's read it slowly and again and again. The further we get from these events, the more we must remember them to make sense of the world we live in now.

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TRILLIA NEWBELL is the author of several books including *A Great Cloud of Witnesses*, *Sacred Endurance*, *If God Is For Us*, *Fear and Faith*, and the children's books, *Creative God*, *Colorful Us* and *God's Very Good Idea*. When she isn't writing, she's encouraging and supporting other writers as an Acquisitions Editor at Moody Publishers. Trillia is married to her best friend, Thern; they reside with their two children near Nashville, TN. You can find her at [trillianewbell.com](http://trillianewbell.com).

# NARRATIVE OF THE LIFE OF FREDERICK DOUGLASS

## CHAPTER I

I WAS BORN IN TUCKAHOE, near Hillsborough, and about 12 miles from Easton, in Talbot county, Maryland. I have no accurate knowledge of my age, never having seen any authentic record containing it. By far the larger part of the slaves know as little of their ages as horses know of theirs, and it is the wish of most masters within my knowledge to keep their slaves thus ignorant. [...] The nearest estimate I can give makes me now between 27 and 28 years of age. I come to this, from hearing my master say, some time during 1835, I was about 17 years old.

My mother was named Harriet Bailey. [...] My father was a white man. He was admitted to be such by all I ever heard speak of my parentage. The opinion was also whispered that my master was my father; but of the correctness of this opinion, I know nothing; the means of knowing was withheld from me. My mother and I were separated when I was but an infant—before I knew her as my mother. It is a common custom, in the part of Maryland from which I ran away, to part children from their mothers at a very early age. Frequently, before the child has reached its 12th month, its mother is taken from it, and hired out on some farm a considerable distance off, and the child is placed under the care of an old woman, too old for field labor. For what this separation is done, I do not know, unless it be to hinder the development of the

child's affection toward its mother, and to blunt and destroy the natural affection of the mother for the child. This is the inevitable result.

I never saw my mother, to know her as such, more than four or five times in my life; and each of these times was very short in duration, and at night. She made her journeys to see me in the night, travelling the whole distance on foot, after the performance of her day's work. She was a field hand, and a whipping is the penalty of not being in the field at sunrise, unless a slave has special permission from his or her master to the contrary—a permission which they seldom get, and one that gives to him that gives it the proud name of being a kind master. I do not recollect of ever seeing my mother by the light of day. [...] Death soon ended what little we could have while she lived, and with it her hardships and suffering. She died when I was about seven years old, on one of my master's farms, near Lee's Mill. I was not allowed to be present during her illness, at her death, or burial. She was gone long before I knew anything about it. Never having enjoyed, to any considerable extent, her soothing presence, her tender and watchful care, I received the tidings of her death with much the same emotions I should have probably felt at the death of a stranger.

[...]

I have had two masters. My first master's name was Anthony. I do not remember his first name. He was generally called Captain Anthony—a title which, I presume, he acquired by sailing a craft on the Chesapeake Bay. He was not considered a rich slaveholder. He owned two or three farms, and about 30 slaves. His farms and slaves were under the care of an overseer. The overseer's name was Plummer. Mr. Plummer was a miserable drunkard, a profane swearer, and a savage monster. He always went armed with a cowskin and a heavy cudgel. I have known him to cut and slash the women's heads so horribly, that even master would be enraged at his cruelty, and would threaten to whip him if he did not mind himself. Master, however, was not a humane slaveholder. It required extraordinary barbarity on the part of an overseer to affect him. He was a cruel man, hardened by a long life of slaveholding. He would at times seem to take great pleasure in



whipping a slave. I have often been awakened at the dawn of day by the most heart-rending shrieks of an own aunt of mine, whom he used to tie up to a joist, and whip upon her naked back till she was literally covered with blood. No words, no tears, no prayers, from his gory victim, seemed to move his iron heart from its bloody purpose. The louder she screamed, the harder he whipped; and where the blood ran fastest, there he whipped longest. He would whip her to make her scream, and whip her to make her hush; and not until overcome by fatigue, would he cease to swing the blood-clotted cowskin. I remember the first time I ever witnessed this horrible exhibition. I was quite a child, but I well remember it. I never shall forget it whilst I remember anything. It was the first of a long series of such outrages, of which I was doomed to be a witness and a participant. It struck me with awful force. It was the bloodstained gate, the entrance to the hell of slavery, through which I was about to pass. [...]



## CHAPTERS II–IV.

*When Douglass was about six years old, he was moved to the plantation of a very wealthy slaveowner by the name of Colonel Lloyd, for whom his master, Captain Anthony, worked as a clerk and superintendent. By Douglass's estimation, Colonel Lloyd owned over 20 farms and enslaved over 1000 people. Young Frederick lived on Lloyd's "Great Home Farm," which served as the seat of government for the whole operation. Here, disputes were settled and monthly allowances were dispensed; it "wore the appearance of a country village," wrote Douglass. "All the mechanical operations for all the farms were performed here." This included shoemaking and mending, blacksmithing, wagon- and barrel-making, weaving, and grain-grinding.*

*As a young child, Douglass did not yet have many responsibilities on the plantation, but that did not mean he was exempt from the privations of hunger and cold. Children were expected to eat corn mush out of a common trough "like so many pigs," which meant "he that ate fastest got most; he*

*that was strongest secured the best place; and few left the trough satisfied.” As for clothing, Douglass had to suffice with a single linen shirt for hot and cold seasons alike—no shoes, jacket, or trousers—and only a single blanket for a bed.*

*He was also exposed to the violent cruelties of slavery, including the casual murder of one of the field slaves at the hands of an overseer.*



## CHAPTER V.

*When Douglass was between seven and eight years old, he was informed that he was to leave Colonel Lloyd’s plantation to live in Baltimore with Hugh Auld, brother to his master’s son-in-law. Douglass found no reason to mourn his departure from the Great Home Farm: “My mother was dead, my grandmother lived far off, so that I seldom saw her. I had two sisters and one brother, that lived in the same house with me; but the early separation of us from our mother had well nigh blotted the fact of our relationship from our memories. I looked for home elsewhere, and was confident of finding none which I should relish less than the one which I was leaving.” Douglass’s move to Baltimore turned out to be a major turning point in his life.*

We arrived at Baltimore early on Sunday morning, landing at Smith’s Wharf, not far from Bowley’s Wharf. [...] Mr. and Mrs. Auld were both at home, and met me at the door with their little son Thomas, to take care of whom I had been given. And here I saw what I had never seen before; it was a white face beaming with the most kindly emotions; it was the face of my new mistress, Sophia Auld. I wish I could describe the rapture that flashed through my soul as I beheld it. It was a new and strange sight to me, brightening up my pathway with the light of happiness. Little Thomas was told, there was his Freddy,—and I was told to take care of little Thomas; and thus I entered upon the duties of my new home with the most cheering prospect ahead.

I look upon my departure from Colonel Lloyd's plantation as one of the most interesting events of my life. It is possible, and even quite probable, that but for the mere circumstance of being removed from that plantation to Baltimore, I should have today, instead of being here seated by my own table, in the enjoyment of freedom and the happiness of home, writing this Narrative, been confined in the galling chains of slavery. Going to live at Baltimore laid the foundation, and opened the gateway, to all my subsequent prosperity. I have ever regarded it as the first plain manifestation of that kind providence which has ever since attended me, and marked my life with so many favors. I regarded the selection of myself as being somewhat remarkable. There were a number of slave children that might have been sent from the plantation to Baltimore. There were those younger, those older, and those of the same age. I was chosen from among them all, and was the first, last, and only choice.

I may be deemed superstitious, and even egotistical, in regarding this event as a special interposition of divine Providence in my favor. But I should be false to the earliest sentiments of my soul, if I suppressed the opinion. I prefer to be true to myself, even at the hazard of incurring the ridicule of others, rather than to be false, and incur my own abhorrence. From my earliest recollection, I date the entertainment of a deep conviction that slavery would not always be able to hold me within its foul embrace; and in the darkest hours of my career in slavery, this living word of faith and spirit of hope departed not from me, but remained like ministering angels to cheer me through the gloom. This good spirit was from God, and to him I offer thanksgiving and praise.



## CHAPTER VI.

My new mistress proved to be all she appeared when I first met her at the door—a woman of the kindest heart and finest feelings. She had never had a slave under her control previously to myself, and prior to her

marriage she had been dependent upon her own industry for a living. She was by trade a weaver; and by constant application to her business, she had been in a good degree preserved from the blighting and dehumanizing effects of slavery. I was utterly astonished at her goodness. I scarcely knew how to behave towards her. She was entirely unlike any other white woman I had ever seen. I could not approach her as I was accustomed to approach other white ladies. My early instruction was all out of place. The crouching servility, usually so acceptable a quality in a slave, did not answer when manifested toward her. Her favor was not gained by it; she seemed to be disturbed by it. She did not deem it impudent or unmannerly for a slave to look her in the face. The meanest slave was put fully at ease in her presence, and none left without feeling better for having seen her. Her face was made of heavenly smiles, and her voice of tranquil music.

But, alas! This kind heart had but a short time to remain such. The fatal poison of irresponsible power was already in her hands, and soon commenced its infernal work. That cheerful eye, under the influence of slavery, soon became red with rage; that voice, made all of sweet accord, changed to one of harsh and horrid discord; and that angelic face gave place to that of a demon.

Very soon after I went to live with Mr. and Mrs. Auld, she very kindly commenced to teach me the A, B, C. After I had learned this, she assisted me in learning to spell words of three or four letters. Just at this point of my progress, Mr. Auld found out what was going on, and at once forbade Mrs. Auld to instruct me further, telling her, among other things, that it was unlawful, as well as unsafe, to teach a slave to read. To use his own words, further, he said, "If you give a nigger an inch, he will take an *ell*. A nigger should know nothing but to obey his master—to do as he is told to do. Learning would spoil the best nigger in the world. Now," said he, "if you teach that nigger (speaking of myself) how to read, there would be no keeping him. It would forever unfit him to be a slave. He would at once become unmanageable, and of no value to his master. As to himself, it could do him no good, but a great deal of harm. It would make him discontented and unhappy." These words

sank deep into my heart, stirred up sentiments within that lay slumbering, and called into existence an entirely new train of thought. It was a new and special revelation, explaining dark and mysterious things, with which my youthful understanding had struggled, but struggled in vain. I now understood what had been to me a most perplexing difficulty—to wit, the white man's power to enslave the black man. It was a grand achievement, and I prized it highly. From that moment, I understood the pathway from slavery to freedom. It was just what I wanted, and I got it at a time when I the least expected it. Whilst I was saddened by the thought of losing the aid of my kind mistress, I was gladdened by the invaluable instruction which, by the merest accident, I had gained from my master. Though conscious of the difficulty of learning without a teacher, I set out with high hope, and a fixed purpose, at whatever cost of trouble, to learn how to read.

[...]



## CHAPTER VII.

I lived in Master Hugh's family about seven years. During this time, I succeeded in learning to read and write. In accomplishing this, I was compelled to resort to various stratagems. I had no regular teacher. My mistress, who had kindly commenced to instruct me, had, in compliance with the advice and direction of her husband, not only ceased to instruct, but had set her face against my being instructed by anyone else. It is due, however, to my mistress to say of her, that she did not adopt this course of treatment immediately. She at first lacked the depravity indispensable to shutting me up in mental darkness. It was at least necessary for her to have some training in the exercise of irresponsible power, to make her equal to the task of treating me as though I were a brute.

My mistress was, as I have said, a kind and tender-hearted woman; and in the simplicity of her soul she commenced, when I first went to



live with her, to treat me as she supposed one human being ought to treat another. In entering upon the duties of a slaveholder, she did not seem to perceive that I sustained to her the relation of a mere chattel, and that for her to treat me as a human being was not only wrong, but dangerously so. Slavery proved as injurious to her as it did to me. When I went there, she was a pious, warm, and tender-hearted woman. There was no sorrow or suffering for which she had not a tear. She had bread for the hungry, clothes for the naked, and comfort for every mourner that came within her reach. Slavery soon proved its ability to divest her of these heavenly qualities. Under its influence, the tender heart became stone, and the lamblike disposition gave way to one of tiger-like fierceness. The first step in her downward course was in her ceasing to instruct me. She now commenced to practice her husband's precepts. She finally became even more violent in her opposition than her husband himself. She was not satisfied with simply doing as well as he had commanded; she seemed anxious to do better. Nothing seemed to make her more angry than to see me with a newspaper. She seemed to think that here lay the danger. I have had her rush at me with a face made all up of fury, and snatch from me a newspaper, in a manner that fully revealed her apprehension. She was an apt woman; and a little experience soon demonstrated, to her satisfaction, that education and slavery were incompatible with each other.

From this time I was most narrowly watched. If I was in a separate room any considerable length of time, I was sure to be suspected of having a book, and was at once called to give an account of myself. All this, however, was too late. The first step had been taken. Mistress, in teaching me the alphabet, had given me the inch, and no precaution could prevent me from taking the *ell*.

The plan which I adopted, and the one by which I was most successful, was that of making friends of all the little white boys whom I met in the street. As many of these as I could, I converted into teachers. With their kindly aid, obtained at different times and in different places, I finally succeeded in learning to read. When I was sent of errands, I always took my book with me, and by going one part of my errand

quickly, I found time to get a lesson before my return. I used also to carry bread with me, enough of which was always in the house, and to which I was always welcome; for I was much better off in this regard than many of the poor white children in our neighborhood. This bread I used to bestow upon the hungry little urchins, who, in return, would give me that more valuable bread of knowledge. [...]

I was now about twelve years old, and the thought of being a slave for life began to bear heavily upon my heart. Just about this time, I got hold of a book entitled "The Columbian Orator." Every opportunity I got, I used to read this book. Among much of other interesting matter, I found in it a dialogue between a master and his slave. The slave was represented as having run away from his master three times. The dialogue represented the conversation which took place between them, when the slave was retaken the third time. In this dialogue, the whole argument in behalf of slavery was brought forward by the master, all of which was disposed of by the slave. The slave was made to say some very smart as well as impressive things in reply to his master—things which had the desired though unexpected effect; for the conversation resulted in the voluntary emancipation of the slave on the part of the master.

In the same book, I met with one of Sheridan's mighty speeches on and in behalf of Catholic emancipation. These were choice documents to me. I read them over and over again with unabated interest. They gave tongue to interesting thoughts of my own soul, which had frequently flashed through my mind, and died away for want of utterance. The moral which I gained from the dialogue was the power of truth over the conscience of even a slaveholder. What I got from Sheridan was a bold denunciation of slavery, and a powerful vindication of human rights. The reading of these documents enabled me to utter my thoughts, and to meet the arguments brought forward to sustain slavery; but while they relieved me of one difficulty, they brought on another even more painful than the one of which I was relieved. The more I read, the more I was led to abhor and detest my enslavers. I could regard them in no other light than a band of successful robbers, who had left their homes, and gone to Africa, and stolen us from our homes,

and in a strange land reduced us to slavery. I loathed them as being the meanest as well as the most wicked of men. As I read and contemplated the subject, behold! that very discontentment which Master Hugh had predicted would follow my learning to read had already come, to torment and sting my soul to unutterable anguish. As I writhed under it, I would at times feel that learning to read had been a curse rather than a blessing. It had given me a view of my wretched condition, without the remedy. It opened my eyes to the horrible pit, but to no ladder upon which to get out. In moments of agony, I envied my fellow-slaves for their stupidity. I have often wished myself a beast. I preferred the condition of the meanest reptile to my own. Anything, no matter what, to get rid of thinking! It was this everlasting thinking of my condition that tormented me. There was no getting rid of it. It was pressed upon me by every object within sight or hearing, animate or inanimate. The silver trump of freedom had roused my soul to eternal wakefulness. Freedom now appeared, to disappear no more forever. It was heard in every sound, and seen in every thing. It was ever present to torment me with a sense of my wretched condition. I saw nothing without seeing it, I heard nothing without hearing it, and felt nothing without feeling it. It looked from every star, it smiled in every calm, breathed in every wind, and moved in every storm.

I often found myself regretting my own existence, and wishing myself dead; and but for the hope of being free, I have no doubt but that I should have killed myself, or done something for which I should have been killed. [...]



## CHAPTER IX.

*Following the death of his original enslaver, Captain Anthony, Douglass was “inherited” by Anthony’s son-in-law, Thomas Auld, but remained with Hugh Auld’s family in Baltimore. In 1833, following a feud between the two Auld brothers, Douglass moved back to the countryside to live with Thomas.*

*After relatively good treatment and adequate food in the city, Douglass found the work and privations of plantation life very hard.*

I have now reached a period of my life when I can give dates. I left Baltimore, and went to live with Master Thomas Auld, at St. Michael's, in March, 1832. It was now more than seven years since I lived with him in the family of my old master, on Colonel Lloyd's plantation. We of course were now almost entire strangers to each other. He was to me a new master, and I to him a new slave. I was ignorant of his temper and disposition; he was equally so of mine. A very short time, however, brought us into full acquaintance with each other. I was made acquainted with his wife not less than with himself. They were well matched, being equally mean and cruel. I was now, for the first time during a space of more than seven years, made to feel the painful gnawings of hunger—a something which I had not experienced before since I left Colonel Lloyd's plantation. [...] A great many times have we poor creatures been nearly perishing with hunger, when food in abundance lay mouldering in the safe and smoke-house, and our pious mistress was aware of the fact; and yet that mistress and her husband would kneel every morning, and pray that God would bless them in basket and store!

Bad as all slaveholders are, we seldom meet one destitute of every element of character commanding respect. My master was one of this rare sort. I do not know of one single noble act ever performed by him. The leading trait in his character was meanness; and if there were any other element in his nature, it was made subject to this. He was mean; and, like most other mean men, he lacked the ability to conceal his meanness. Captain Auld was not born a slaveholder. He had been a poor man, master only of a Bay craft. He came into possession of all his slaves by marriage; and of all men, adopted slaveholders are the worst. He was cruel, but cowardly. [...] The luxury of having slaves of his own to wait upon him was something new and unprepared for. [...] In August, 1832, my master attended a Methodist camp-meeting held in the Bay-side, Talbot county, and there experienced religion. I indulged

a faint hope that his conversion would lead him to emancipate his slaves, and that, if he did not do this, it would, at any rate, make him more kind and humane. I was disappointed in both these respects. It neither made him to be humane to his slaves, nor to emancipate them. If it had any effect on his character, it made him more cruel and hateful in all his ways; for I believe him to have been a much worse man after his conversion than before. Prior to his conversion, he relied upon his own depravity to shield and sustain him in his savage barbarity; but after his conversion, he found religious sanction and support for his slaveholding cruelty. He made the greatest pretensions to piety. His house was the house of prayer. He prayed morning, noon, and night. He very soon distinguished himself among his brethren, and was soon made a class-leader and exhorter. His activity in revivals was great, and he proved himself an instrument in the hands of the church in converting many souls. His house was the preachers' home. They used to take great pleasure in coming there to put up; for while he starved us, he stuffed them. [...]



## CHAPTER X.

*After living with Thomas Auld for nine months, during which time the two were frequently in conflict, Douglass was sent to live with a man named Edward Covey. Covey was a poor man, but he "had acquired a very high reputation for breaking young slaves, and this reputation was of immense value to him." Thomas Auld's intent was that Douglass would be a more pliant worker upon his return. Indeed, Douglass suffered much during this year.*

I lived with Mr. Covey one year. During the first six months of that year, scarce a week passed without his whipping me. I was seldom free from a sore back. My awkwardness was almost always his excuse for whipping me. We were worked fully up to the point of endurance. Long before day we were up, our horses fed, and by the first approach of day



we were off to the field with our hoes and ploughing teams. Mr. Covey gave us enough to eat, but scarce time to eat it. We were often less than five minutes taking our meals. We were often in the field from the first approach of day till its last lingering ray had left us; and at saving-fodder time, midnight often caught us in the field binding blades.

[...]

If at any one time of my life more than another, I was made to drink the bitterest dregs of slavery, that time was during the first six months of my stay with Mr. Covey. We were worked in all weathers. It was never too hot or too cold; it could never rain, blow, hail, or snow, too hard for us to work in the field. Work, work, work, was scarcely more the order of the day than of the night. The longest days were too short for him, and the shortest nights too long for him. I was somewhat unmanageable when I first went there, but a few months of this discipline tamed me. Mr. Covey succeeded in breaking me. I was broken in body, soul, and spirit. My natural elasticity was crushed, my intellect languished, the disposition to read departed, the cheerful spark that lingered about my eye died; the dark night of slavery closed in upon me; and behold a man transformed into a brute!

Sunday was my only leisure time. I spent this in a sort of beast-like stupor, between sleep and wake, under some large tree. At times I would rise up, a flash of energetic freedom would dart through my soul, accompanied with a faint beam of hope, that flickered for a moment, and then vanished. I sank down again, mourning over my wretched condition. I was sometimes prompted to take my life, and that of Covey, but was prevented by a combination of hope and fear. My sufferings on this plantation seem now like a dream rather than a stern reality.

Our house stood within a few rods of the Chesapeake Bay, whose broad bosom was ever white with sails from every quarter of the habitable globe. Those beautiful vessels, robed in purest white, so delightful to the eye of freemen, were to me so many shrouded ghosts, to terrify and torment me with thoughts of my wretched condition. I have often, in the deep stillness of a summer's Sabbath, stood all alone upon the lofty banks of that noble bay, and traced, with saddened heart and

tearful eye, the countless number of sails moving off to the mighty ocean. The sight of these always affected me powerfully. My thoughts would compel utterance; and there, with no audience but the Almighty, I would pour out my soul's complaint, in my rude way, with an apostrophe to the moving multitude of ships:—

“You are loosed from your moorings, and are free; I am fast in my chains, and am a slave! You move merrily before the gentle gale, and I sadly before the bloody whip! You are freedom's swift-winged angels, that fly round the world; I am confined in bands of iron! [...] O, why was I born a man, of whom to make a brute! The glad ship is gone; she hides in the dim distance. I am left in the hottest hell of unending slavery. O God, save me! God, deliver me! Let me be free! Is there any God? Why am I a slave? I will run away. I will not stand it. Get caught, or get clear, I'll try it. I had as well die with ague as the fever. I have only one life to lose. I had as well be killed running as die standing. Only think of it; one hundred miles straight north, and I am free! Try it? Yes! God helping me, I will. It cannot be that I shall live and die a slave. [...] Let but the first opportunity offer, and, come what will, I am off. Meanwhile, I will try to bear up under the yoke. I am not the only slave in the world. Why should I fret? I can bear as much as any of them. Besides, I am but a boy, and all boys are bound to some one. It may be that my misery in slavery will only increase my happiness when I get free. There is a better day coming.”

Thus I used to think, and thus I used to speak to myself; goaded almost to madness at one moment, and at the next reconciling myself to my wretched lot.

*Halfway through his year with Covey, Douglass's condition changed unexpectedly. One hot day in August, Douglass became very ill while fanning wheat, probably due to heat exhaustion. He collapsed and was unable to stand, but Covey beat him severely anyway, insisting he get back to work. At this point, Douglass ran away, back to the home of Thomas Auld, hoping that his master would intervene on his behalf. In this respect, he was disappointed. When Douglass was forced to return to Covey's farm the next day,*

*he and Covey had a physical altercation. But in their fight, Douglass had the upper hand and refused to let himself be tied in order to be whipped. Eventually, and surprisingly, Covey gave up and let Douglass go without further punishment.*

This battle with Mr. Covey was the turning-point in my career as a slave. It rekindled the few expiring embers of freedom, and revived within me a sense of my own manhood. It recalled the departed self-confidence, and inspired me again with a determination to be free. The gratification afforded by the triumph was a full compensation for whatever else might follow, even death itself. He only can understand the deep satisfaction which I experienced, who has himself repelled by force the bloody arm of slavery. I felt as I never felt before. It was a glorious resurrection, from the tomb of slavery, to the heaven of freedom. My long-crushed spirit rose, cowardice departed, bold defiance took its place; and I now resolved that, however long I might remain a slave in form, the day had passed forever when I could be a slave in fact. I did not hesitate to let it be known of me, that the white man who expected to succeed in whipping, must also succeed in killing me.

From this time I was never again what might be called fairly whipped, though I remained a slave four years afterwards. I had several fights, but was never whipped.

[...]

On the first of January, 1834, I left Mr. Covey, and went to live with Mr. William Freeland, who lived about three miles from St. Michael's. I soon found Mr. Freeland a very different man from Mr. Covey. Though not rich, he was what would be called an educated southern gentleman. Mr. Covey, as I have shown, was a well-trained negro-breaker and slave-driver. The former (slaveholder though he was) seemed to possess some regard for honor, some reverence for justice, and some respect for humanity. [...] Another advantage I gained in my new master was, he made no pretensions to, or profession of, religion; and this, in my opinion, was truly a great advantage. I assert most unhesitatingly, that the religion of the south is a mere covering for the most

horrid crimes,—a justifier of the most appalling barbarity,—a sanctifier of the most hateful frauds,—and a dark shelter under which the darkest, foulest, grossest, and most infernal deeds of slaveholders find the strongest protection. Were I to be again reduced to the chains of slavery, next to that enslavement, I should regard being the slave of a religious master the greatest calamity that could befall me. For of all slaveholders with whom I have ever met, religious slaveholders are the worst. I have ever found them the meanest and basest, the most cruel and cowardly, of all others.

[...]

Mr. Freeland was himself the owner of but two slaves. Their names were Henry Harris and John Harris. The rest of his hands he hired. These consisted of myself, Sandy Jenkins, and Handy Caldwell. Henry and John were quite intelligent, and in a very little while after I went there, I succeeded in creating in them a strong desire to learn how to read. This desire soon sprang up in the others also. They very soon mustered up some old spelling-books, and nothing would do but that I must keep a Sabbath school. I agreed to do so, and accordingly devoted my Sundays to teaching these my loved fellow-slaves how to read. Neither of them knew his letters when I went there. Some of the slaves of the neighboring farms found what was going on, and also availed themselves of this little opportunity to learn to read. It was understood, among all who came, that there must be as little display about it as possible. It was necessary to keep our religious masters at St. Michael's unacquainted with the fact, that, instead of spending the Sabbath in wrestling, boxing, and drinking whisky, we were trying to learn how to read the will of God; for they had much rather see us engaged in those degrading sports, than to see us behaving like intellectual, moral, and accountable beings.

I held my Sabbath school at the house of a free colored man, whose name I deem it imprudent to mention; for should it be known, it might embarrass him greatly, though the crime of holding the school was committed ten years ago. I had at one time over 40 scholars, and those of the right sort, ardently desiring to learn. They were of all ages,

though mostly men and women. I look back to those Sundays with an amount of pleasure not to be expressed. They were great days to my soul. The work of instructing my dear fellow-slaves was the sweetest engagement with which I was ever blessed. We loved each other, and to leave them at the close of the Sabbath was a severe cross indeed. When I think that these precious souls are to-day shut up in the prison-house of slavery, my feelings overcome me, and I am almost ready to ask, "Does a righteous God govern the universe? and for what does he hold the thunders in his right hand, if not to smite the oppressor, and deliver the spoiled out of the hand of the spoiler?" These dear souls came not to Sabbath school because it was popular to do so, nor did I teach them because it was reputable to be thus engaged. Every moment they spent in that school, they were liable to be taken up, and given thirty-nine lashes. They came because they wished to learn. Their minds had been starved by their cruel masters. They had been shut up in mental darkness. I taught them, because it was the delight of my soul to be doing something that looked like bettering the condition of my race. [...]

At the close of the year 1834, Mr. Freeland again hired me of my master, for the year 1835. But, by this time, I began to want to live upon *free* land as well as with *Freeland*; and I was no longer content, therefore, to live with him or any other slaveholder. I began, with the commencement of the year, to prepare myself for a final struggle, which should decide my fate one way or the other. My tendency was upward. I was fast approaching manhood, and year after year had passed, and I was still a slave. These thoughts roused me—I must do something. I therefore resolved that 1835 should not pass without witnessing an attempt, on my part, to secure my liberty.

*In 1835, Douglass and several of his enslaved friends made plans to escape north, Douglass being determined not to leave behind these men whom he had come to love "with a love stronger than anything I have experienced since." "In coming to a fixed determination to run away," Douglass wrote, "we did more than Patrick Henry, when he resolved upon liberty or death.*



*With us it was a doubtful liberty at most, and almost certain death if we failed. For my part, I should prefer death to hopeless bondage.”*

*Unfortunately, the day before their intended departure, Douglass and his friends were betrayed, locked in jail for a time, and ultimately separated. This, Douglass wrote, “caused me more pain than anything else in the whole transaction. I was ready for anything rather than separation.”*

*After this failed attempt, Douglass was sent back to Baltimore to again work for Hugh Auld and learn a trade. Initially, he was thrown into employment in a shipyard without any training, where he was exhaustingly at the beck and call of dozens of carpenters and ship-builders. But after a serious fight with a handful of white carpenters (Douglass kept his vow never to let another white man strike him without striking back), Hugh Auld sent him to a different shipyard. There, Douglass quickly learned the trade of caulking, and the course of his life once again changed.*

In the course of one year from the time I left Mr. Gardner’s [shipyard], I was able to command the highest wages given to the most experienced calkers. I was now of some importance to my master. I was bringing him from six to seven dollars per week. I sometimes brought him nine dollars per week: my wages were a dollar and a half a day. After learning how to calk, I sought my own employment, made my own contracts, and collected the money which I earned. My pathway became much more smooth than before; my condition was now much more comfortable. When I could get no calking to do, I did nothing. During these leisure times, those old notions about freedom would steal over me again. When in [the first shipyard’s] employment, I was kept in such a perpetual whirl of excitement, I could think of nothing, scarcely, but my life; and in thinking of my life, I almost forgot my liberty. I have observed this in my experience of slavery,—that whenever my condition was improved, instead of its increasing my contentment, it only increased my desire to be free, and set me to thinking of plans to gain my freedom. I have found that, to make a contented slave, it is necessary to make a thoughtless one. It is necessary to darken his moral and mental vision, and, as far as possible, to annihilate the power

of reason. He must be able to detect no inconsistencies in slavery; he must be made to feel that slavery is right; and he can be brought to that only when he ceases to be a man.

I was now getting, as I have said, one dollar and fifty cents per day. I contracted for it; I earned it; it was paid to me; it was rightfully my own; yet, upon each returning Saturday night, I was compelled to deliver every cent of that money to Master Hugh. And why? Not because he earned it,—not because he had any hand in earning it,—not because I owed it to him,—nor because he possessed the slightest shadow of a right to it; but solely because he had the power to compel me to give it up. The right of the grim-visaged pirate upon the high seas is exactly the same.



## CHAPTER XI.

[...]

In the early part of the year 1838, I became quite restless. I could see no reason why I should, at the end of each week, pour the reward of my toil into the purse of my master. When I carried to him my weekly wages, he would, after counting the money, look me in the face with a robber-like fierceness, and ask, "Is this all?" He was satisfied with nothing less than the last cent. He would, however, when I made him six dollars, sometimes give me six cents, to encourage me. It had the opposite effect. I regarded it as a sort of admission of my right to the whole. The fact that he gave me any part of my wages was proof, to my mind, that he believed me entitled to the whole of them. I always felt worse for having received anything; for I feared that the giving me a few cents would ease his conscience, and make him feel himself to be a pretty honorable sort of robber. My discontent grew upon me. I was ever on the look-out for means of escape; and, finding no direct means, I determined to try to hire my time, with a view of getting money with which to make my escape.

*Douglass “worked for hire” for about four months, meaning that he was now responsible for all his expenses but could keep any wages made over a certain threshold. During this time he was able to save up a little money, before Hugh Auld changed his mind and Douglass had to return to the old system of handing over all his wages each week. Nevertheless, he was still resolved to run away at the earliest opportunity. (In his memoirs, Douglass did not provide details about his escape from Baltimore, not wanting to unintentionally aid slave-catchers, so this part of the story is mostly skipped over in Narrative.)*

[As I planned my escape,] things went on without very smoothly indeed, but within there was trouble. It is impossible for me to describe my feelings as the time of my contemplated start drew near. I had a number of warm-hearted friends in Baltimore,—friends that I loved almost as I did my life,—and the thought of being separated from them forever was painful beyond expression. It is my opinion that thousands would escape from slavery, who now remain, but for the strong cords of affection that bind them to their friends. The thought of leaving my friends was decidedly the most painful thought with which I had to contend. The love of them was my tender point, and shook my decision more than all things else. Besides the pain of separation, the dread and apprehension of a failure exceeded what I had experienced at my first attempt. The appalling defeat I then sustained returned to torment me. I felt assured that, if I failed in this attempt, my case would be a hopeless one—it would seal my fate as a slave forever. I could not hope to get off with anything less than the severest punishment, and being placed beyond the means of escape. It required no very vivid imagination to depict the most frightful scenes through which I should have to pass, in case I failed. The wretchedness of slavery, and the blessedness of freedom, were perpetually before me. It was life and death with me. But I remained firm, and, according to my resolution, on the third day of September, 1838, I left my chains, and succeeded in reaching New York without the slightest interruption of any kind. How I did so,— what means I adopted,—what direction I travelled,

and by what mode of conveyance,—I must leave unexplained, for the reasons before mentioned.

I have been frequently asked how I felt when I found myself in a free State. I have never been able to answer the question with any satisfaction to myself. It was a moment of the highest excitement I ever experienced. I suppose I felt as one may imagine the unarmed mariner to feel when he is rescued by a friendly man-of-war from the pursuit of a pirate. In writing to a dear friend, immediately after my arrival at New York, I said I felt like one who had escaped a den of hungry lions. This state of mind, however, very soon subsided; and I was again seized with a feeling of great insecurity and loneliness. I was yet liable to be taken back, and subjected to all the tortures of slavery. This in itself was enough to damp the ardor of my enthusiasm. But the loneliness overcame me. There I was in the midst of thousands, and yet a perfect stranger; without home and without friends, in the midst of thousands of my own brethren—children of a common Father, and yet I dared not to unfold to any one of them my sad condition. I was afraid to speak to any one for fear of speaking to the wrong one, and thereby falling into the hands of money-loving kidnappers, whose business it was to lie in wait for the panting fugitive, as the ferocious beasts of the forest lie in wait for their prey. The motto which I adopted when I started from slavery was this—“Trust no man!” I saw in every white man an enemy, and in almost every colored man cause for distrust. It was a most painful situation; and, to understand it, one must needs experience it, or imagine himself in similar circumstances. Let him be a fugitive slave in a strange land—a land given up to be the hunting-ground for slaveholders—whose inhabitants are legalized kidnappers—where he is every moment subjected to the terrible liability of being seized upon by his fellow-men, as the hideous crocodile seizes upon his prey!—I say, let him place himself in my situation—without home or friends—without money or credit—wanting shelter, and no one to give it—wanting bread, and no money to buy it,—and at the same time let him feel that he is pursued by merciless men-hunters, and in total darkness as to what to do, where to go, or where to stay,—perfectly helpless both as

to the means of defence and means of escape,—in the midst of plenty, yet suffering the terrible gnawings of hunger,—in the midst of houses, yet having no home,—among fellow-men, yet feeling as if in the midst of wild beasts, whose greediness to swallow up the trembling and half-famished fugitive is only equaled by that with which the monsters of the deep swallow up the helpless fish upon which they subsist,—I say, let him be placed in this most trying situation,—the situation in which I was placed,— then, and not till then, will he fully appreciate the hardships of, and know how to sympathize with, the toil-worn and whip-scarred fugitive slave.

*With the help of abolitionists in New York, Douglass eventually made his way to New Bedford, Massachusetts, where he intended to resume work as a caulker in a shipyard. He was accompanied by his new wife, Anna, a free woman he had met in Baltimore and who had aided him in his escape. As soon as Douglass had arrived safely in New England, he wrote to Anna; she joined him and they were married. Douglass found the conditions of New Bedford surprising. He had assumed that white people in the northern states would be poor, given that they did not have a source of free labor, and was therefore startled by the prosperity of the white and black communities alike.*

*Douglass was unable to find work as a caulker, however, because the white caulkers refused to work with black caulkers, effectively blocking them from gaining employment. So Douglass worked odd jobs for three years until he gave a speech at an anti-slavery convention and became, from that time on, a prominent figure in the abolitionist movement.*



## APPENDIX.

I find, since reading over the foregoing Narrative, that I have, in several instances, spoken in such a tone and manner, respecting religion, as may possibly lead those unacquainted with my religious views to suppose me an opponent of all religion. To remove the liability of such



misapprehension, I deem it proper to append the following brief explanation. What I have said respecting and against religion, I mean strictly to apply to the slaveholding religion of this land, and with no possible reference to Christianity proper; for, between the Christianity of this land, and the Christianity of Christ, I recognize the widest possible difference—so wide, that to receive the one as good, pure, and holy, is of necessity to reject the other as bad, corrupt, and wicked. To be the friend of the one, is of necessity to be the enemy of the other. I love the pure, peaceable, and impartial Christianity of Christ: I therefore hate the corrupt, slaveholding, women-whipping, cradle-plundering, partial and hypocritical Christianity of this land. Indeed, I can see no reason, but the most deceitful one, for calling the religion of this land Christianity. I look upon it as the climax of all misnomers, the boldest of all frauds, and the grossest of all libels. Never was there a clearer case of “stealing the livery of the court of heaven to serve the devil in.” I am filled with unutterable loathing when I contemplate the religious pomp and show, together with the horrible inconsistencies, which every where surround me. We have men-stealers for ministers, women-whippers for missionaries, and cradle-plunderers for church members. The man who wields the blood-clotted cowskin during the week fills the pulpit on Sunday, and claims to be a minister of the meek and lowly Jesus. The man who robs me of my earnings at the end of each week meets me as a classleader on Sunday morning, to show me the way of life, and the path of salvation. He who sells my sister, for purposes of prostitution, stands forth as the pious advocate of purity. He who proclaims it a religious duty to read the Bible denies me the right of learning to read the name of the God who made me. He who is the religious advocate of marriage robs whole millions of its sacred influence, and leaves them to the ravages of wholesale pollution. [...] Here we have religion and robbery the allies of each other—devils dressed in angels’ robes, and hell presenting the semblance of paradise.

[...]

Dark and terrible as is this picture, I hold it to be strictly true of the overwhelming mass of professed Christians in America. They strain

at a gnat, and swallow a camel. Could anything be more true of our churches? They would be shocked at the proposition of fellowshipping a sheep-stealer; and at the same time they hug to their communion a man-stealer, and brand me with being an infidel, if I find fault with them for it. They attend with Pharisaical strictness to the outward forms of religion, and at the same time neglect the weightier matters of the law, judgment, mercy, and faith. They are always ready to sacrifice, but seldom to show mercy. They are they who are represented as professing to love God whom they have not seen, whilst they hate their brother whom they have seen. They love the heathen on the other side of the globe. They can pray for him, pay money to have the Bible put into his hand, and missionaries to instruct him; while they despise and totally neglect the heathen at their own doors.

Such is, very briefly, my view of the religion of this land; and to avoid any misunderstanding, growing out of the use of general terms, I mean by the religion of this land, that which is revealed in the words, deeds, and actions, of those bodies, north and south, calling themselves Christian churches, and yet in union with slaveholders. It is against religion, as presented by these bodies, that I have felt it my duty to testify.

[...]

Sincerely and earnestly hoping that this little book may do something toward throwing light on the American slave system, and hastening the glad day of deliverance to the millions of my brethren in bonds—faithfully relying upon the power of truth, love, and justice, for success in my humble efforts—and solemnly pledging myself anew to the sacred cause,—I subscribe myself,

*FREDERICK DOUGLASS.*

*LYNN, Mass., April 28, 1845.*





## THE TRINITY FORUM



# Group Discussion Guide

## Discussion Questions

**1** Having taught himself to read, Frederick Douglass went on to become a prolific writer and tireless orator. How are words—both spoken and written—related to freedom? How are they related to power? What connection does Douglass draw between them? Why, in the words of one of his early masters, would learning to read “forever unfit him to be a slave”?

**2** “I would at times feel that learning to read had been a curse rather than a blessing,” Douglass writes of his youth in Baltimore. “It had given me a view of my wretched condition, without the remedy. It opened my eyes to the horrible pit, but to no ladder upon which to get out.” In what ways is education sometimes painful in the manner that Douglass describes? In your own life, has learning ever proved so uncomfortable that you almost felt your new knowledge was “a curse rather than a blessing”?

**3** According to Douglass, “Slavery proved as injurious to [Sophia Auld, his master’s wife] as it did to me.” What effect does slavery have on the heart and mind of the enslaver? Why does it have this effect? Were the perpetrators of slavery aware of its corrupting power on their own lives? How do people become blind to the humanity of others?

**4** As introduction author Trillia Newbell asks, what does the support for and tolerance of the evils of slavery say about the tendency of the human heart—even among people of faith—to justify and rationalize oppression and injustice? How do we learn to recognize systems, policies, or practices that are damaging or demeaning to others? Are there any such systems or practices you are part of that could be damaging to others—or to yourself?

**5** Throughout his life, Douglass was concerned with questions of his origin: the date of his birth and the identity of his father. Why is this information so important in the formation of one's personal identity? What are the possible psychological consequences when this information is unavailable or withheld?

**6** After Douglass's fight with Covey, he states, "I now resolved that, however long I might remain a slave in form, the day had passed forever when I could be a slave in fact." What do you think Douglass means by this? What is the difference between being a slave "in fact" and "in form"?

**7** Despite having witnessed and suffered under some of the worst of Christian hypocrisy, Douglass maintained a deep faith throughout his life. How do you think he was able to do so? How does one separate the foundational claims and hope of Christianity from the repellant example of some of those who claim to practice it?

**8** Douglass writes, "For of all slaveholders with whom I have ever met, religious slaveholders are the worst. I have ever found them the meanest and basest, the most cruel and cowardly, of all others." Why might this be the case? How is religion used to justify mistreatment?

**9** What is the right attitude towards renowned figures of the past who either implicitly or explicitly condoned slavery and yet also advanced groundbreaking or humanitarian ideas or institutions in other areas—such as Jonathan Edwards or Thomas Jefferson?

**10** How does the expressive language of Douglass's prose advance his overall argument and influence the reader's reaction? How would this book be different if were written in a strictly journalistic style?

**11** Thanks in part to his own advocacy, Douglass lived to see the abolition of slavery, but he also witnessed the subsequent failures of Reconstruction in the South and the rise of Jim Crow policies. In what ways has America failed to continue the work that Douglass began? In what ways has it succeeded? What remains to be done?



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Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, “This Child Will be Great,” *The Trinity Forum Reading*, 2017

Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn “One World of Truth,” *The Trinity Forum Reading*, 1997



## Further Resources

David W. Blight, *Frederick Douglass: Prophet of Freedom* (Simon & Schuster, 2018)

D. H. Dilbeck, “The Radical Christian Faith of Frederick Douglass” (*Christianity Today*, December 21, 2017, [www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2018/january-february/frederick-douglass-at-200-remembering-his-radical-christian.html](http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2018/january-february/frederick-douglass-at-200-remembering-his-radical-christian.html))

Frederick Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom* (Penguin Classics, 2003)

Frederick Douglass, “What to the Slave in the Fourth of July?” (speech, July 5, 1852, [teachingamericanhistory.org/library/document/what-to-the-slave-is-the-fourth-of-july/](http://teachingamericanhistory.org/library/document/what-to-the-slave-is-the-fourth-of-july/))

Eds. John Stauffer and Henry Louis Gates Jr., *The Portable Frederick Douglass* (Penguin Classics, 2016)

John Stauffer, Zoe Trodd, and Celeste-Marie Bernier, *Picturing Frederick Douglass: An Illustrated Biography of the Nineteenth Century's Most Photographed American* (Liveright, 2015)

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P.O. Box 9464

McLean, Virginia 22102-0464 USA

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