

FREE INDEED

John 8:33-36

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Second Presbyterian Church, Greenville, SC, November 2, 2008

“So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed” (Jn. 8:36).

“Free at last! Thank God Almighty, I’m free at last!” Martin Luther King spoke these words at the conclusion of his famous “I Have a Dream” speech in 1963. He was referring to his hope for an America free from racism. Our Founding Fathers based their vision on political freedoms: “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.” Others exult in freedom from drug addiction, chronic disease, or credit-card debt. Freedom is what the human soul craves. As is written on the Statue of Liberty in New York harbor, man was made “yearning to breathe free.”

The greatest liberator the world has ever seen is the Lord Jesus Christ. It was to free captive humanity that Jesus came into this world. “If the Son sets you free,” he declared, “you will be free indeed” (Jn. 8:36).

THE GREATEST BONDAGE

John 8 records Jesus engaged in a lengthy debate with the Pharisees over his Messianic claims. At one point a group of people expressed their belief in what Jesus was saying, so he turned to instruct them. Jesus said, “If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free” (Jn. 8:31-32). But the idea that they needed to be set free provoked an objection: “They answered him, ‘We are offspring of Abraham and have never been enslaved to anyone. How is it that you say, ‘You will become free’?” (Jn. 8:33).

This was a remarkable reply. The Jewish people had at one time or another served Egypt, Assyria, Babylon, Greece, and Syria, and at

that moment they were laden with the yoke of Roman domination. The Romans occupied their cities, forced them to pay taxes to Caesar, and supervised their civic rule; all around them were facts to prove that they were a subdued nation in slavery to their conquerors. Because of this, many commentators think they were speaking of inward liberty. Jews considered freedom their birthright. The ancient rabbinical text, the Mishna, states, “Even the poorest in Israel are looked upon as freemen who have lost their possessions, for they are the sons of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.”¹

Regardless of the intention, their answer shows that the greatest bondage is that of which we are not even aware. The greatest bondage is that of the man who thinks he is free while he is yet bound in chains. This is the condition of so many people today who insist that they are “free spirits” and “free thinkers,” when in fact they are slaves to the sinful culture around them. People think they are being “daring” and “free” when in reality they are being molded into the most debased conformity by popular trends and seductive advertising. The one thing they will not abide is the suggestion that they are not free! A. W. Pink observes that the idea that man needs to be set free is “a truth that the natural man cannot tolerate. The very announcement of it stirs up the enmity within him.”² This is the reality demonstrated by these onlookers who indignantly rebuffed Jesus’ claim that “the truth will set you free” (Jn. 8:33).

Indeed, there could be no clearer proof of their bondage than their refusal to receive the Son of God. All through John chapter 8 we have reflected on Jesus’ claim to be the light of the world. We have seen that darkness involves the bondage of ignorance and depravity. What could prove this better than for them to reject Jesus! Jesus had said, “The light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their deeds were evil” (Jn. 3:19). So great was the bondage of these Jews in darkness that even their great privileges as God’s covenant people became a snare to them. Presuming on their status before God, they rejected the very Savior God had promised to send. Crying out from behind the prison

¹ Cited from Andreas J. Kostenberger, *John* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004), 262.

² Arthur W. Pink, *Exposition of the Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1975), 449.

bars of their darkened unbelief, they insisted, “We are offspring of Abraham and have never been enslaved” (Jn. 8:33).

SLAVES TO SIN

Jesus replied with one of many important statements in the Gospel of John. We know this is important because he prefaced it with the words, “Truly, truly, I say to you,” signifying a teaching of special solemnity. “Truly, truly, I say to you,” Jesus said, “everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin” (Jn. 8:34).

Here is the great and fundamental bondage in which the entire human race is enslaved – the bondage of sin. At the heart of every other bondage is this: “Everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin.” John Calvin writes, “Enslaved by the desires of the flesh, they continually sin... He is speaking of... the state of human nature.”³

After all, why do we sin? People respond, “Because we are doing the things that we like, regardless of what others think. Sin is an expression of our freedom.” But what they do not ask is why they like to sin. The answer is that our nature is enslaved to sin. Pink writes: “The condition of the natural man is far, far worse than he imagines... Man is a fallen creature, totally depraved, with no soundness in him from the sole of his foot even unto the head (Isa. 1:6). He is completely under the dominion of sin (Jn. 8:34), a bond-slave to divers lusts (Titus 3:3), so that he ‘cannot cease from sin’ (2 Pet. 2:14).”⁴

It is in this teaching that Christianity most strongly conflicts with worldly thinking: in its insistence that man is not good but sinful. God created man good (Gen. 1:31), but we have fallen into evil. We are therefore not sinners because we sin; rather, we sin because we are sinners. This is why you do not know a single person who does not sin, a fact worth noting. And sin cannot be accounted for by appeal to bad training and environments, since children begin to sin as soon as they can to act for themselves. According to David, from the moment of our conception we are corrupted by sin: “Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin did my mother conceive me”

³ John Calvin, *New Testament Commentaries*, trans. T.H.L. Parker, 12 vols. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1959), 4:223.

⁴ Pink, 449.

(Ps. 51:5). It is for this reason that Paul taught, “None is righteous, no, not one... No one does good, not even one” (Rom. 3:10-12).

From these teachings we derive the doctrine of original sin. Original sin refers not to the first sin of Adam and Eve but rather to the condition into which their sin cast all their offspring. Original sin is not a problem they had then but a problem we suffer from now. We may boast of our freedom, whether we are ancient Jews or modern Americans, but the reality is that our wills are constrained by sin. Martyn Lloyd-Jones exclaims: “The world is in unutterable slavery. Oh, the power of this darkness! Why do we keep on doing things that we know are wrong? Why do we do things that we know hurt us? Why do we do these things though we know something of their consequences?”⁵ The answer is the ruling power of sin. As Jesus said, “Everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin” (Jn. 8:34).

We are enslaved not only by our sinful condition but also by actual sins we commit. When our hearts provoke us first to dabble with a sin, we are sure we can handle it. We believe that we are the masters and sin is servant. But how quickly we learn that the opposite is true. Why is it that sin always takes us farther than we ever intended to go and holds us far longer than we ever thought would happen? Because to commit a sin is to expose yourself to slavery. At first, we resist temptation. But after we have yielded, the resistance gets weaker until finally we hardly need to be tempted at all. Before long, instead of doing what he likes, “man who sins does *not* do what he likes; he does what sin likes... So far from doing what he likes, the sinner has lost the power to do what he likes. He is a slave to the habits, the self-indulgences, the wrong pleasures which have mastered him.”⁶

This is why Jesus says, “*If* the Son sets you free” (Jn. 8:36). We must be set free or else we will perish in our sins. Earlier, Jesus said, “Unless you believe that I am he you will die in your sins.” (Jn. 8:24). God sent his Son into this world to free us from our bondage in sin. Unless we receive him in faith, we must continue in slavery to sin and end our lives in the condemnation of God’s just wrath.

⁵ D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Love So Amazing: Expositions of Colossians I*, 17.

⁶ William Barclay, *The Gospel of John*, 2 vols. (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1975), 2:27.

This seems to be the point of Jesus' words in John 8:35: "The slave does not remain in the house forever; the son remains forever." The Jews had denied their need for freedom on the grounds that they were Abraham's children. But Jesus reminds them that Abraham had many children, not all of whom retained their privileges. Especially, there was Ishmael, Abraham's first son, born to the slave woman Hagar. While he lived in the house he benefited from Abraham's care, just as sinners do in God's world. But because Ishmael was not a free son, the time came when he was sent away. God commanded Abraham, "Cast out this slave woman with her son, for the son of this slave woman shall not be heir" (Gen. 21:10). By referring to this, Jesus pointed out that even Abraham's sons could not be accepted by God so long as they were slaves to sin. But Abraham's second son, born of grace through the barren womb of his wife Sarah, was Isaac. He remained forever in Abraham's household and as a true son of faith inherited his covenant blessings.

This was meant as a warning to the Pharisees. Before them stood the true and eternal Son of God. If they continued to oppose him they would be cast out with no hope of salvation, regardless of their human lineage. Only by receiving their freedom through faith in Jesus, as Abraham and Isaac had done by trusting God's promises, would they gain the rights of true sons. As John earlier had written, "To all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God" (Jn. 1:12). This is the gospel Jesus proclaimed: that man fallen into the slavery of sin can find deliverance and freedom only by entering God's spiritual family, through faith in God's only Son, Jesus Christ. "If the Son sets you free," he said, "you will be free indeed" (Jn. 8:36).

BY PRICE AND BY POWER

When we think of the bondage of sin, it is helpful to realize that the Bible conceives of this in two ways, just as there are two ways in which Jesus frees us from sin.

The first deals with sin's guilt, which binds us to be condemned under God's holy wrath. God says, "The wages of sin is death" (Rom. 6:23). The Bible tells of a great judgment day in which all will be judged according to their deeds. Therefore, Paul warns that sinners

who do not repent and come to Christ “are storing up wrath for [themselves] on the day of wrath when God's righteous judgment will be revealed.” (Rom. 2:5).

If God is perfectly just and if God’s wrath is promised against all sin, how is it possible for sinners to be freed from their guilt? The answer is that God’s Son redeemed us by the price of his blood. We are freed from God’s wrath *by price* – by the precious blood of Jesus shed in payment for our sins. Our sins accrued a debt to God’s justice so that we were enslaved to God’s coming wrath. But Jesus paid that price on our behalf to set us free. Peter wrote, “You were ransomed... not with perishable things such as silver or gold, but with the precious blood of Christ” (1 Pet. 1:18-19).

But there is a second way in which Jesus frees the believer from the slavery of sin. Just as we are held in bondage by the guilt of our sins, we also are held captive by the reign of sin. Jesus said that we are slaves to sin, so that we are not able to resist the strength of our corruption or of sin’s temptation. But having freed us by price, Jesus now frees us *by power*. Therefore, Paul writes to believers, “Sin will have no dominion over you” (Rom. 6:14). He explains, “For the law of the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death” (Rom. 8:2). As his blood freed us from sin’s penalty, Jesus sends his Spirit to free us from sin’s power. Augustus Toplady therefore wrote, “Be of sin the double cure; cleanse us from its guilt and power.”⁷

The sinner who comes to Jesus for deliverance may still be challenged and troubled by sin, but he cannot be condemned or held captive by sin. No longer slaves but sons, we are now able to resist and refuse sin. “If anyone is in Christ,” Paul said, “he is a new creation” (2 Cor. 5:17). In Christ we have a new master and a new service: “To put off your old self, which belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful desires, and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and to put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness.” (Eph. 4:22-24).

⁷ Augustus Toplady, *Rock of Ages*, 1776.

Because Jesus has set us free from sin's guilt by price, the Christian need never fear death. And because Jesus has set us free from sin's reign by his power, the Christian need never fear life. But this deliverance is only received and experienced through faith in Jesus. He said, "Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life. He does not come into judgment, but has passed from death to life" (Jn. 5:24). Apart from him there is no escape from the penalty and power of sin: "Unless you believe that I am he," he warns, "you will die in your sins" (Jn. 8:24).

FREE INDEED!

Our deliverance in Christ is the greatest wonder in all the universe. The old Puritan John Flavel exulted:

How could it be imagined that ever those who owed unto God more than than ever they could pay by their own eternal sufferings; those that were under the dreadful curse and condemnation of the law, in the power and possession of Satan the strong man armed; those that were bound with so many chains in their spiritual prison; their understanding bound with ignorance, their wills with obstinacy, their hearts with impenetrable hardness, their affections with a thousand bewitching vanities... for such persons to be set at liberty notwithstanding all this, is the wonder of wonders, and will be deservedly marvelous in the eyes of believers for ever.⁸

Our freedom from sin is the greatest liberty possible. All other forms of bondage arise from sin, so when we are set free from sin by the Son, we are free indeed! We are set free from fear, knowing that in Christ we have become God's beloved children, destined to live in glory forever. We are freed from the binding influence of our own darkness. We are not free from trials but from the power of trials to steal our joy. Most importantly, we are free to know and serve God and thus fulfill the purpose of our lives. Arthur Pink writes: "The man of the world imagines that to become a Christian means to forego his freedom. He supposes that he would be fettered with a lot of restrictions which nullified his liberty... The very opposite from what he supposes is really the case. It is the one out of Christ, not the one in Christ, who is in bondage – in "the bond of iniquity" (Acts 8:12)."⁹

⁸ John Flavel, *The Works of John Flavel*, 6 vols. (London: Banner of Truth, 1968), 2:275.

⁹ Pink, 451.

But the Christian comes to know what Paul calls “the freedom of the glory of the children of God” (Rom. 8:21), the freedom to participate in the new world born in the resurrection of Christ. As the Holy Spirit works in our lives and as we grow in freedom by devoting ourselves to God’s Word, we are set free to really care about other people, no longer being so absorbed with ourselves, set free to give our lives away for things that really matter, set free from the domination of sinful desires and habits, and set free to bear the marks of God’s grace in our lives.

What an incentive this is for every sinner to turn in faith to Jesus Christ – poor captives set free by God’s gift of his Son! Unless you are so blinded by the power of sin, so hardened in unbelief, and so deceived in the bondage of darkness, surely you must open your hearts to the words of this Savior: “If the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed!” (Jn. 8:36). And for those who have believed, what joy is there for us in Christ. Unlike the unbelieving Jews who insisted, “We have never been enslaved,” we can exclaim with joy, “We were slaves to sin, but the Son of God has set us free!” This then shapes the calling of our lives from now on, to live and grow in our freedom purchased by the blood of Christ.

FREE AT LAST!

One man who found freedom was Louis Zamperini. He was an angry, criminal youth growing up in Torrance, California. But he was freed from this life by his success in athletics. In 1936, Zamperini competed in the Olympic Games, finishing eighth in the 5000 meter race and looking forward to the 1940 games where he hoped to win gold.

But the onset of World War II changed those dreams. Soon he was flying bomber planes in the Pacific theatre. After many dangerous missions, his plane went down off the Marshall Islands in 1943. Adrift for seven weeks, Louis and two others barely survived in a raft. When one of them died, Louis asked God to rescue him, promising to serve him if he got home. He did survive, but was rescued by the Japanese. For two years, he led a tortured existence as a prisoner of war, subject to near starvation and savage brutality.

But Louis was set free again by the Allied victory. He returned home as a war-hero. The city's airfield was named after him and soon he married the girl of his dreams. But he was haunted by the violence afflicted against him and his hatred of the Japanese. He wasted all his money on get-rich schemes, drowned his pain in alcohol, and brought his marriage near to ruin. His freedom had been an illusion.

In 1949, a Christian neighbor invited Louis and his wife to attend a gathering where Billy Graham was preaching. Louis refused to attend but his wife came home and announced, "I've accepted Jesus Christ as my Savior." Yielding to her appeals, he promised to go just once. Graham preached, "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Rom. 3:23). Zamperini was angered that his good deeds could not earn his way to heaven. When Graham continued preaching, "He saved us, not because of righteous things we have done, but because of his mercy" (Tit. 3:5), Zamperini stormed out.

That night, however, he could not put Graham's preaching out of his mind. He remembered another verse that was preached: "Man is destined to die once, and after that to face judgment" (Heb. 9:27). He agreed to return to the service a few days later and Graham preached on the inability of money to satisfy the soul. Louis recalled how he had sought salvation through get-rich schemes. Then he heard two more Bible verses: "God has given us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. He who has the Son has life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have life" (1 Jn. 5:11-12). Struck by the emptiness of his life and convicted by the Holy Spirit, Louis Zamperini humbled himself before God. He repented for his godless life, including his neglect of the promise he had prayed on the raft. He put his faith in Jesus for the first time. He recalls "an enveloping calm that let me know that I had come to Christ and he had come to me."

Louis then experienced true freedom. Finally, the words of the old spiritual song might be said of him: "Free at last! Thank God Almighty, I'm free at last!" He was freed from sin, emptiness, anger, folly, and especially from hatred. In 1950 he returned to Japan to face his former captors. At a prison for war criminals, Louis preached Christ's message of forgiveness. In a private meeting, the former guards at his own prison camp were gathered. He told them that he

had forgiven the terrible things they had done to him because of Jesus' love, and some of them believed as a result.

The Zamperinis became members of First Presbyterian Church in Hollywood, California. Remembering his troubled youth, he devoted himself to reaching young boys for Christ. Over the years, the Victory Boys' Camp he founded turned around the lives of multitudes of youths and led many to saving faith. Still famous sixty years after the war, Zamperini was interviewed in 2004. He told the reporter, "Christ told us in the Scripture, 'I am the way, I am the truth, and I am the life. Whoever comes to me I will never drive away.' Christ is the way to God. I believe that eternal life starts now by faith in Jesus Christ. That is the strength we live by, and death no longer has a sting – not for the Christian."¹⁰

Louis Zamperini had been saved many times from horrible fates. But he was never truly free until he came to Jesus. From torment to joy, anger to forgiveness, hatred to love, selfishness to selflessness, and from wasted talents to an abundant, fruitful life, Jesus had set him free. Jesus promises that same salvation to anyone who comes to him in faith. He says, "If the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed."

¹⁰ Taken from a brief biography of Louis Zamperini, in Don Stephens, *War and Grace* (Darlington, UK: Evangelical Press, 2005), 21-43.