
Freed For Christ

Primary Scripture: Philippians 1:12-27

Secondary Scripture: Deuteronomy 34:4-12

Subject: Mission

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As we celebrate our political freedoms as Americans today, I want us to consider our spiritual freedoms. What does it mean to be Freed *For* Christ? If God has set us free, what would it mean for us to live for him?

I remember back in college, in my very first religion class, as a newly freed freshman, my professor opened his class with a very provocative question. Are you free? Naturally, most of us said “yes.” So he asked it again, “are you totally free?” And while a few hands may have gone down, most of us held onto our American ideal of freedom and said—yes of course we are free. Naturally, as freshmen in college we were no longer under the constant monitoring of our parents, so we felt that we were “free.” So, in a professorial sort of way, he said, “Okay, then immediately transport yourself to Paris, France.” Suddenly I knew it was going to be a challenging semester.

His point was that while we may feel free of most restraints in our lives, we were still bound to certain things—like physics, time, and gravity. While we gain some freedom, we are all still bound to other things. Maybe it’s our job title, our family image, an unhealthy relationship.

As followers of Christ as people of faith make a bold, and radical statement—we are free people, but also we are servants to God, or as Paul says, we are bound to Christ. God’s promises of grace and forgiveness do set us free. They free us from our past mistakes, from the things that tie us down. from our shortcomings, from the powers of sin.

We are released from something, we are set free.

A lot of church movements, however, put the emphasis upon this particular act of salvation, the act of being freed from our pasts.

God has never saved someone from something, without saving us for something. God does not call us from something if he does not also call us to something.

If we look at these two stories of Paul and of Moses we see men of faith, whose

“freedom” was a call to service. To demonstrate the compassion and hope they have been given from God to the world.

1.

In the story of Moses we witness a man who gave everything to help the Israelites. The story of Moses is one of compassion towards the Israelites. They were a people who were in slavery to the Egyptians. They were bound to an oppressive group of people, and God used Moses, a free man, to help lead the Israelites from the bondage of slavery to become His Chosen people in the Promised Land.

Notice where Moses, personally, falls into this story. He is chosen to lead these people from their bondage into their new, promised land. He had been living in the house of the Pharaoh, a prominent place of prestige and power, when he was called by God to lead these poor Israelites. He was led out of a life of luxury, prominence and ease into a difficult and barren land. For 40 years he led them.

Yet, just at the cusp of entering that new territory, that new land, Moses died. He never got to experience the freedom and the land that he kept leading his people towards. Moses was a servant of God, God used Moses, God Freed Moses for the sake of the community. Moses got to deal with all the headaches, the complaining, the golden calf, the failures of the Israelites, AND he never got to enjoy the benefits of his service. He was told because he disobeyed God by striking a rock that he would be barred from the promised land. Even though the Israelites had done so much worse, Moses was the one banned—it did not seem fair.

Moses, however, understood his role, he had been freed for God’s purposes. He had been freed for the benefit of God—not for himself.

God led him up to the Mount of Nebo and said, “I have let you see the promised land with your own eyes, but you shall not cross over there.” That is what it means to be Freed For Christ—that we live, not for ourselves but for the benefit of God and for others.

2.

We see this same sort of compassion in Paul. Paul, who is the author of much of the New Testament, wrote his letter to the Philippians while in Prison. He went from a position of power and prestige, a person with political influence, as a Pharisee into a jail cell because of his faith.

Notice the similarities between Paul and Moses, they both left places of power, places of luxury to live out their faith.

Notice, however, the contrast in the two stories as well. For the Israelites they were set free from oppression because of their faith. It seems that for Paul, the opposite

is true, his faith has led him to prison. He probably spent 6 of his 15 years as a Christian in prison.

Yet, while the external reality was that he was not free, the internal reality is that he was free, because he had hope in Christ. As he says elsewhere in one of his letters, “I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us” (Romans 8:18).

Paul has the ability to look beyond his current situations to see the bigger picture to see God’s plan for him and the church. That is the second way that we are Freed For Christ. Is that we have a longer term perspective, we have hope.

Not only do we look beyond ourselves like Moses: serve others, but we also take a longer—eternal—view of the world: we have hope, without hope, our faith is nothing.

It is this perspective that Paul writes to the Church in Philippi saying, “I want you to know, beloved, that what has happened to me has actually helped to spread the gospel” (v. 12). On the surface that does not seem logical. Paul is saying that his imprisonment, his arrest has actually helped to spread the gospel. That is a bold perspective because it says God’s plans are even bigger than what makes logical sense to *me*.

Instead of preaching a Gospel about himself--Paul is preaching a Gospel about God. Notice the structure of his response. He first reports about how the Gospel is doing, and then gives a personal report. Paul’s emphasis, even in his own personal struggles is placed upon God’s gospel. He even says that while for him it would be better to die and to go to heaven, he knows that for their sake it is necessary that he stay in prison. Paul has confidence and hope.

With Paul in prison—the emperor—the outside world, may have thought they destroyed Christian movement, they ridiculed his hope, but actually they have emboldened it and given it new life.

How is this possible? Because Christianity is a faith built upon the cross. God uses a cross—a device used for death to symbolize love. God uses a random band of disciples who end up in prison to spread his Gospel. The message of the Gospel is that from the cross comes the resurrection, from death comes life, from bondage comes freedom, from tragedy-hope, from darkness-light.

Paul’s imprisonment spreads the gospel because he has held onto his core conviction that Jesus Christ came into this world to set us free reconnect us to God. Paul can say from his jail cell “I will continue to rejoice for I know that through your prayers and the help of the Spirit of Jesus Christ this will turn out for my deliverance” (v. 18-19).

Paul’s hope is possible because of the supportive church community who is praying for him, and because of God’s Holy Spirit, that no matter how bad life gets, in the end it will work out for him. It is this confidence, boldness and hope that allows Paul

to be Freed for Christ. By taking this view, Paul is able to live a life worthy of the Gospel, and to live for Christ. One that makes people stop and take notice. For it is not only the church who notices, but also the world.

3.

That is what is amazing about this passage from Paul's letter...he says that the whole imperial guard knows who he is. The bad guys, the people who are holding him in prison, the ones who are restricting his freedoms, know who Paul is because of Paul's confidence in Jesus Christ.

That is the final thing that it means to be Freed For Christ...we must also witness to our faith in Christ. We must point the reason, the why we serve, the how we can have hope...the foundation of our faith.

Paul says that the Imperial Guard knows that his imprisonment is *for* Christ. It is through Paul's public witness to his faith that the government takes notice. Through Paul's willingness to suffer on behalf of Christ, not only is the church inspired, but the world is transformed.

There is a powerful example of this from the Holocaust. In his book *The Orbit of Darkness*, Ian MacMillan tells this story:

In July 1941, the commanders of Auschwitz gathered the prisoners to take roll call. They realized that one of the prisoners had escaped, and so, as punishment, they selected 10 men to starve to death as a warning to the others. The first nine were led away, but the 10th began to protest. It is at this moment that someone volunteers to replace the tenth man. It turns out that this tenth man was a Catholic Priest. And so he was lead away to starve with the others. He begins to lead the other nine in songs and prayers in the cell. The incessant sounds inspire other prisoners around the camp, and set some of the guards on edge. Legends circulate around the camp that the priest had habitually given his rations to others, and had not flinched when being heavily flogged by the guards. Days go by, and the guards who come to remove a body, cannot hold the priest's gaze. The other prisoners realize that the guards are scared of the priest. By the tenth day, the guard begins to plead with the commandment to be given other duties. Prisoners are beginning to imitate the priest, and share their food with the most needy...by offering himself, the priest has inspired others to gain the upper hand in the primal struggle. On the 14th day, one of the guards commits suicide by hurling himself into the electrical fence. The commandment orders that prisoners shall be beaten to death for mentioning the priest's name, for helping each other, or for giving food away. The following day, the priest is murdered with an injection of carbolic acid. But even after his death the unease only grows and there is a sense that the camp will never be the same again because of this one priest.¹

¹ As told in Wells, Samuel, *Improvisation: The Drama of Christian Ethics* (Brazos Press: Grand Rapids, 2004), 141.

He left an indelible mark.

Like Paul and Moses, this priest exemplifies what it means to live for Christ. It is one that is for the benefit of other people, one that is focused on the bigger picture—not his immediate sufferings—and one that seeks to transform a particular community and a world. This is the adventure God's calls us to when he sets us free.

To be freed by Christ, means that we believe that God came into this world as Jesus Christ. That God put on human flesh to have a relationship, with us. And to show us the depth of his love, that by taking on the punishment of the cross, and by overcoming death, each of us have been set free.

However, we are freed *for* something. Our faith in Christ is not to be hoarded, but to be lived on the behalf of the world. In our homes, in our schools, in our business offices, as Paul says in Philippians, we should be living a life that is worthy of the Gospel.

It challenges us to consider, what ways are we living out our lives as Christians? It challenges those outside the church to hold us accountable, to watch, and to come join the adventure. The Good news is that we have all been set free through Christ, but that we are set free for something.

It is through this calling that we may experience the richness, the depth, and the freedom of Christ's love for us. So to answer my professor's question: Are we free people? Yes, we are free people who are called to serve a living and loving God.