

Freedom in Christ

Aim: To show from the scriptures what the term “*Freedom in Christ*” means.

Reading: **John 8:31-36** “.....*the truth shall make you free....*”

Introduction:

Freedom is something that most people hold dear. We like to be in control of our own lives and destinies. Most of us would like to fulfil our own desires. One thing that we don't like is when things get in the way and hold us back from doing what we want to do.

Longing for freedom is something that has been seen in various contexts throughout history. For example;

- the slaves in America during the 1800s.
- the civil rights movement (also in America).
- people fighting for independence for their country.
- prisoners trying to escape from jail.
- Even teenagers wanting to leave home.

In fact, the hope of freedom is something that people are prepared to fight and even die for.

But what about the freedom (or liberty¹) that we read about in the New Testament, for example, from our reading in **John 8:32** ? Sometimes the term is used to justify religious practices for which there is no Biblical authority. I have heard statements like;

- “*My freedom in Christ means that I am not restricted to what I find written in scripture*”
- “*My freedom in Christ means that I am no longer bound by any law.*”
- “*My freedom in Christ means that I can express my love to Christ in ways not recorded in scripture.*”²

But what do the scriptures have to say on the matter ? What does God's Word teach about the phrase, “*freedom in Christ*”? After all, it is possible for people to mis-understand what Jesus meant when He said, “....*and the truth shall make you free.*” (**John 8:32**)

– see verse **33**. People thought that He was talking about some sort of physical slavery.

1) Background – the Old Law

To help us to understand the meaning of what Jesus said in **John 8:31-36**, we should start with looking at the context in which His statements were made.

a) From the time of Moses to Christ

From the time when the Hebrews were assembled before God at Mt Sinai (**Exodus 19; 20**), until the time of Christ's death, burial and resurrection, the

¹ “*Liberty*” – **Romans 8:21; 1 Corinthians 8:9; Galatians 5:13; 1 Peter 2:16** (NKJV)

² In some respects, this may be true – God's Word doesn't explicitly spell out all the ways and scenarios that we can use to show love to one another. But are those who make these statements proposing some new type of religious activity or practice?, or something that comes within the scope of Biblical principles that are contained within God's Word ?

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Jews were governed by the Old Testament Law. This Law is sometimes called, the Law of Moses, because it was given by God through Moses (**John 1:17a**).

Most people are aware of the Ten Commandments (**Exodus 20:1-17**). But there were many other laws, instructions and regulations. When you read the book of Leviticus, you can see many of these laws covering topics, such as;

- Religious practices,
- Foods permitted and foods forbidden,
- Health issues, *e.g.* leprosy,
- Sexual morality,
- Ceremonial laws,
- Social laws.

Having given His people these laws, God expected them to keep them;
“You shall diligently keep the commandments of the Lord your God, His testimonies, and His statutes which He has commanded you.” – **Deuteronomy 6:17** – see also verses **24-25**

b) There was a problem in that people didn't keep the Law perfectly

In **James 2:10-11** we read that if we break just one law, then we are guilty of breaking the whole Law.

People aren't perfect, and the Jews found that they could not keep the Law of God perfectly – they would break one of the laws at some point in time. Not even those who we may consider as being righteous could keep the Law perfectly. The apostle Paul, someone who was zealous for God (**Philippians 3:5-6**³), admitted in his Roman letter the struggle that he had in trying to do what was right. In **Romans 7:14-24** he talks about how he wants to do the right thing, but so many times he finds himself doing the opposite.

The Law itself wasn't the problem. Paul affirms in **Romans 7:7, 12** that the Law is “...*holy and just and good*”. Many people don't like the road rules. But they are there for our benefit and safety. Imagine what it would be like if we could drive on any side of the road we wanted to, and at any speed we wanted to. Without these rules there would be chaos on the roads and more people killed and injured.

The problem with the Law, then, was not the law itself, but the people. It seems to be a feature of humanity that when someone imposes a rule on us, we have a desire to rebel against it and break it. If you don't think that that is true, think about how people respond when they see a sign, “Wet paint – Don't touch” – they feel compelled to touch the painted surface⁴.

God acknowledged that “man” was the problem. In **Hebrews 8:7-8** we read, “...*finding fault with them* (emphasis mine – SK)..”
– the “*them*” being the people.

In addition to all this, the animal sacrifices, although required, did not in and of themselves take away the people's sins (**Hebrews 10:1-4**).

³ From **Romans 7:14-24** and **Philippians 3:6** it can be concluded that, while Paul was guilty of sin, he was blameless in the sense that he offered the correct sacrifices for his sins.

⁴ Perhaps this trait may help explain the meaning of **Romans 7:5**.

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- c) To summarize what we have looked at so far
- (i) The Law was meant to bring life – **Romans 7:10**
i.e. to teach people the right way to live.
 - (ii) If you broke one law, you were guilty of breaking the whole law
– **James 2:10**
 - (iii) People failed to keep the Law perfectly – **Romans 3:23**.
 - (iv) The reward for sin is death – **Romans 6:23**.
 - (v) The Old Testament sacrifices, in and of themselves, could not take away the people's sins – in fact, they were a continual reminder of their sins. - **Hebrews 10:1-4**.

Is it any wonder that Paul said, “...*a man is not justified by the works of the law...*” – **Galatians 2:16**. Man was not justified on the basis that he didn't keep it perfectly – he failed so often.

Again, Paul says, “...*cursed is every one who does not continue in all things which are written in the book of the law to do them...*” – **Galatians 3:10**.

Point: The Law that was meant to bring life, only brought death (**Romans 7:10**). It brought death, not because there was anything wrong with the Law itself, but because of the weakness of the flesh – *i.e.* people (**Romans 8:3a**).

The result of the “Old Law system” was that the people who were mindful of, and concerned about, their spiritual state were burdened and weighed down with the guilt of their sins – “*another day, another sin*”.

- consider the mind-set of the tax collector praying in **Luke 18:13**.

Jesus came to seek and to save the lost (**Luke 19:9**). He came to take away the guilt and burden of sin (**Matthew 11:28-29**).

2) Jesus freed us from the Law of Sin and Death

a) The New Covenant

It had always been a part of God's eternal plan to bring in a new covenant (**Ephesians 1:4**). God had promised to Abraham that through him, “...*all the families of the earth shall be blessed*” – **Genesis 12:3b**. As far back as **Genesis 3:15** we see that “someone (*i.e.* the Seed) is coming”. The prophet Jeremiah, who lived in Judah around 600BC, prophesied about the coming of a new covenant - **Jeremiah 31:31-34**. (This prophecy is quoted in **Hebrews 8:8-12**, showing that Jeremiah was talking about the New Covenant, the Christian age.)

The Old Testament Law was only ever meant to be an interim measure until “the Seed” should come – **Galatians 3:1; 23-25**.

b) Jesus' reference to being “free”.

When Jesus spoke of being “*free*” in **John 8:32**, He was not talking about some sort of physical bondage – see verses **33-36**. The freedom that Jesus

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was talking about is what is mentioned in **Romans 8:2** – “*For the law of the Spirit of life⁵ in Christ Jesus has made me free from the law of sin and death.*” What we have in Christ is;

- (i) freedom from the Old Law system – a system that required perfect obedience.
- (ii) freedom from the guilt and burden of sin. Through Christ, we now have forgiveness of sins – **Hebrews 10:12; Ephesians 1:7; Colossians 1:21-22.**

There is “...*therefore now no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus...*” – **Romans 8:1.** And who are those who are in Christ Jesus? Those who have obeyed the gospel – **Romans 6:3-4; Galatians 3:27.**

3) Does this mean that we are free from all Law ?

a) What now – can we do as we like?

Because the Old Law has been taken away (**Ephesians 2:15; Colossians 2:13-14**), some may ask the following questions;

- If we have been “*freed from the law of sin and death*”, does this mean that we are no longer under any sort of law ?
- Because we are saved by God’s grace, not by works (**Ephesians 2:8-9**), does this mean that we don’t have to worry about obeying God ?
- Does this all mean that we don’t have to worry about sin any more ?

Paul answers these questions in **Romans 6:1-2, 15.** He also says in **Galatians 5:13**, “*For you, brethren, have been called to liberty, only do not use liberty as an opportunity for the flesh....*”

- see also **1 Peter 2:16.**

b) Our on-going salvation/forgiveness of sins is conditional

We noticed earlier that in **Romans 8:1** it says that “*There is now no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus....*”. But notice that there is also a condition in this verse;

“...*who do not walk according to the flesh, but according to the Spirit.*”

The state of no longer being condemned for our sins is dependant on how we live our lives as Christians. There is a right way to live, and there is a wrong way. The right way is for us to live in accordance with the Word of God

- **Colossians 1:10; Ephesians 4:1; 5:15-17**

There are other passages showing that on-going forgiveness is conditional;

- Continuing steadfastly in the faith is required – **Colossians 1:21-23a**
- Walking in the light is required – **1 John 1:7**
- Repentance is required – **Acts 8:22a; 2 Corinthians 7:9-10**
- Confession of sins is required – **1 John 1:9**
- Prayer is required – **Acts 8:22b**

⁵ Besides what I have written in this lesson, I have seen two other explanations of the term “*the law of the Spirit of life*” . One is that it refers to the gospel (the doctrine) of the New Testament. The other is in the sense of a “principle” that the “*upward pull*” of the Spirit sets us free from the “*downward pull*” of the flesh. - Truth for Today, Romans 5, Feb 2006, page 38.

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c) God has not left us without any sort of “law”

God has not left us without instructions on how He wants us to live. We are not left without any type of “law”. The content of the New Testament epistles testify to this fact. For example, are not verses like **Ephesians 4:28**, “*Let him who stole steal no longer...*” commands for us to obey? Or do we feel that the instruction to stop stealing is optional? Of course not.

Notice what **Hebrews 8:10** and **10:16** say;

“...I will put my laws⁶ into their hearts, and in their minds I will write them...”.

Further, **Galatians 6:2** shows us that we are subject to “...the law of Christ.”, and **1 John 5:2-3** says “...for this is the love of God that we keep His commandments...”

Remember, these verses were written to Christians. If Christians are not under (or subject to) any sort of law, then what are these verses talking about? What are these commandments referred to in **1 John 5** if they are not laws?⁷

God has given us commandments (“statutes”, “instructions”, “ordinances”, “laws”, “rules”, call them what you like), and He expects us to obey them.

- **Matthew 28:20** “...teaching them to observe all that I have command you....”
- **John 14:15; 15:10, 14** “..if you love Me, keep My commandments..”

Point: There are fundamental differences between the Old and New Covenants.

- Under the Old Covenant, you needed to obey the works of the law perfectly in order to be justified (**Galatians 3:10**).
- Under the New Covenant, we have been justified/saved “up front” (**Titus 3:7; Ephesians 2:8**), and are now required to perfect/compliment our faith through obedient works (**Ephesians 2:10; James 2:19-26**)
- Under the Old Covenant, the sacrifices of animals (in and of themselves) could not take away sins (**Hebrews 10:4**).
- Under the New Covenant, we have forgiveness through the blood of Jesus (**Ephesians 1:7; 1 John 1:7**)
- Under the Old Covenant, you had to obey the law perfectly in order to be without sin (**James 2:10**).
- Under the New Covenant, God is not expecting us to live perfectly – He knows we will fail at times (**1 John 1:8, 10**)
 - God’s grace will take care of our sins once we repent and seek His forgiveness (**Acts 8:22; 1 John 1:9**)

⁶ I have seen a modern translation of the Bible that uses the word “*plan*” in these verses, rather than the word “*laws*”. But the use of the word “*plan*” would seem to change the original meaning and intent of the passage. These references from **Hebrews** are a quote from **Jeremiah 31:33** where the word “*law*” is used. Strong’s Concordance for this Old Testament word (number 8451) describes it as “*”a precept or statute”, i.e. an instruction, a command.*

⁷ This is not to say that we are saved by “law keeping”. We are saved by God’s grace, (**Ephesians 2:8**), but we are also required to be obedient to Him.

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Conclusion:

When we talk about “*freedom in Christ*”, we are talking about the freedom we have from;

- the Law of sin and death (**Romans 8:2**), *i.e.* the Old Law
- the guilt and burden of sin (**Romans 8:1; Matthew 11:28-29**)

Sometimes, people may try to use the term “*freedom in Christ*” as justification to introduce new religious or worship practices for which there is no (approved) Biblical precedent or authority. Some may try to use the term to justify the substitution for what God has put in place with their own ideas. But such use of the term to justify these types of actions is a failure to understand its true meaning.

We can be truly thankful that God has set us free from sin. But with that freedom comes responsibility – a responsibility to serve God in accordance with His Word (**Romans 12:1-2**).