

# Freedom from Slavery (John 8:31-36)

Expository Lessons from the Gospel of John

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## I. Overview of this Section of the Gospel of John

- a. In this next section, Jesus presents His message within the framework of three contrasts:
  - i. Light versus darkness (covered in the previous lesson)
  - ii. Slavery versus freedom (covered in this lesson)
  - iii. Truth versus lies (plan to cover this in the next lesson)
- b. In this lesson we will look at the second of the three pairs of spiritual opposites: slavery versus freedom.

## II. The Truth Shall Make You Free (Read John 8:31-36)

- a. “Then Jesus said to those Jews who believed Him, ‘If you abide in My word, you are My disciples indeed. And you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free.’” (John 8:31-32, NKJV)
  - i. This is a conditional statement, starting with “*if*”.
  - ii. I had learned it years ago in in the NIV, “if you hold to my teaching,” which I equated with obedience. However, since I got a different sense from the NKJV, I compared this verse in other versions.
    - 1. “if you abide in my word” (NKJV, ESV)
    - 2. “if you continue in my word” (KJV, D-R, NASB, LEB, RSV)
    - 3. “if you continue to follow my teaching” (NET)
    - 4. “if you remain in my word” (YLT)
    - 5. “if you hold to my teaching” (just in the NIV)
      - a. Conclusion: From every major translation (other than the NIV), the sense I get is that this means not simply obeying once, but rather continuing/remaining to do so over time.
      - b. In other words, Jesus is calling the Jews who believe in him to *persevere in obeying His teachings*.

- iii. We get an idea of the meaning of the word translated “remain in/ continue in/ hold to” by seeing how the same word (μένω, Strong’s #3306) is used in other places in the New Testament.
  - 1. *(God had told John the Baptist)* “Upon whom you see the Spirit descending, and remaining on Him, this is He who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.” (**John 1:33**, NKJV)
  - 2. *(Jesus giving instructions before sending out his disciples)* “Now whatever city or town you enter, inquire who in it is worthy, and stay there till you go out.” (**Matthew 10:11**, NKJV)
  - 3. Seems from context that this word conveys the idea of: staying somewhere and not departing; remaining in a place. Perhaps “*holding to*” the teachings of Jesus in the NIV would be in the sense of continuing to hold on to something and *not letting go*.
- iv. Let’s consider how this passage, and this term, were understood by early Christians. They have the advantages of being familiar with the Greek language, and they were only a generation or so removed from the apostles.
  - 1. Cyprian, a bishop in Carthage in North Africa (c. 200-258 AD), in referring to **John 8:31-32** clearly understood this passage as calling us to persevere in the faith:
    - a. “It is the wholesome precept of our Lord and Master: ‘He that endures’ He says, ‘to the end, shall be saved;’ (**Matthew 24:13**) and again, ‘If you continue,’ He says, ‘in my word, you shall be truly my disciples; and you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free.’ (**John 8:31-32**) We must endure and persevere, beloved brethren, in order that, being admitted to the hope of truth and liberty, we may attain to the truth and liberty itself” (Source: Cyprian, *Treatise IX, On the Advantage of Patience*; in Ante-Nicene Fathers vol. 5, p. 487)
    - b. This teaching that we must *remain obedient* to the teachings of Jesus is throughout the Scriptures. One example is in **Hebrews 10-12**.
      - i. Read **Hebrew 10:32-39**
        - 1. This is the introduction to and reason for **Hebrews 11**, the great chapter on faith in the New Testament.

2. The Hebrews writer quotes **Habakkuk 2:3-4** from the Septuagint (which mentions that we must not shrink back; unlike the same passage in the Masoretic Text). The righteous will live by faith: meaning true saving faith is a continuing way of life, not just one action.
- ii. One of the great examples of faith in the “hall of heroes of the faith” in **Hebrews 11** is Moses. Of him it says,
    1. “By faith he forsook Egypt, not fearing the wrath of the king; for he endured as seeing Him who is invisible.” (**Hebrews 11:27**, NKJV)
  - iii. Following the end of **Hebrews 11**, we are admonished to learn from the examples of the past heroes of faith. It says,
    1. “Therefore we also, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which so easily ensnares us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith, who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. For consider Him who endured such hostility from sinners against Himself, lest you become weary and discouraged in your souls.” (**Hebrews 12:1-3**, NKJV)
    2. The danger: that we will become weary and discouraged along the way, from life’s trials and disappointments; that we will not persevere and remain loving God with our whole hearts and following the teachings of Jesus.
  - c. Jesus promises freedom to those who continue to follow His teachings, in **John 8:32-36**.
    - i. The Jews He is addressing, are puzzled by Jesus’ statement that if anyone abides in His word they shall know the truth and shall be made free.
      1. They protest, we are Abraham’s descendants and have never been in bondage to anyone. So how can they be made free, if they have always been free?
      2. Jesus is speaking of spiritual bondage, not physical bondage. Freedom from sin and death.
      3. Jesus says anyone who commits sin is *a slave to sin*.

- a. I believe it is critical to use Biblical words and expressions wherever applicable, to clarify confusion in the modern world. One problem today: Christians use the language of psychology instead of Biblical language to describe spiritual problems.
  - i. Example: the term “addiction”, as applied to people who have a hard time breaking free of chronic sins. For example: speaking about ‘drug or alcohol addiction’, ‘food addiction’, or ‘addiction to pornography’.
  - ii. This implies that it is a medical or psychological problem.
  - iii. Short Definition of “addiction”, from the American Society of Addiction Medicine:
    - 1. “Addiction is a primary, chronic disease of brain reward, motivation, memory and related circuitry. Dysfunction in these circuits leads to characteristic biological, psychological, social and spiritual manifestations. This is reflected in an individual pathologically pursuing reward and/or relief by substance use and other behaviors.
    - 2. “Addiction is characterized by inability to consistently abstain, impairment in behavioral control, craving, diminished recognition of significant problems with one’s behaviors and interpersonal relationships, and a dysfunctional emotional response. Like other chronic diseases, addiction often involves cycles of relapse and remission. Without treatment or engagement in recovery activities, addiction is progressive and can result in disability or premature death.”
  - iv. I strongly advocate “using Bible words to describe Bible things”. In this case, the Biblical term would be “enslavement” or perhaps “in bondage”. Using the Biblical term clarifies that this is first and foremost a spiritual problem.

Satan is taking a person captive, who does not want to let them go. It requires a spiritual remedy: calling someone to repent from their sin, self-control, prayer, God's Holy Spirit and grace to overcome, etc.

- d. The New Testament (and Christians today) talk a lot about the "freedom" we have in Christ.
  - i. This "freedom" sometimes refers to the fact that we are free from following the requirements of the Law of Moses (which is true).
  - ii. In some churches, this "freedom in Christ" we have is interpreted to mean we are free from having to obey *any* laws or commandments, since we have been saved by grace. In other words, they claim that we can do what we want. However, that is NOT the kind of freedom that Jesus offers us. Consider what Jesus said:
    1. "And then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness!'" (**Matthew 7:23**, NKJV)
    2. Also, in explaining the Parable of the Wheat and the Tares, Jesus explains: "The Son of Man will send out His angels, and they will gather out of His kingdom all things that offend, and those who practice lawlessness, and will cast them into the furnace of fire. There will be wailing and gnashing of teeth." (**Matthew 13:41-42**, NKJV)
  - iii. In many churches in the US, particularly Evangelical Protestant churches, it is taught that we are free from the consequences of sin. In other words, they (incorrectly) say things like, "Thank God that Jesus paid the price for all my sins past, present, and future. Due to God's grace I am free from the punishment for my sins *regardless of how I live*."
    1. However, is that a proper understanding of the purpose of God's grace?
    2. Paul, (who wrote **Ephesians 2:8**, where he speaks of us being "saved by grace") also wrote: "For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men, teaching us that, denying ungodliness and worldly lusts, we should live soberly, righteously, and godly in the present age," (**Titus 2:11-12**, NKJV)

- a. According to Paul, the grace (which simply means *favor*) of God teaches us to resist sin and to live Godly, self-controlled lives.
  - b. The freedom we have from sin is not just from the consequences (punishment) of sin, but also over sin itself.
- e. Recently I taught a class on “The Exodus Map – Allegory of the Christian Life” to a Christian apologetics group that meets at Harvard. (That was similar to a lesson we had recently in our house church).
  - i. Several at the group were from evangelical backgrounds. It included Paul’s explanation in **1 Corinthians 9:24-10:13** that the journey of the Jews through the Wilderness in **Exodus** through **Deuteronomy** foreshadowed the Christian life. Paul clearly states that we Christians, even if we have been baptized and are “eating the spiritual food and drinking the spiritual drink” must be diligent to not fall into the four sins mentioned, so that we do not get disqualified from the prize we are seeking: eternal life.
  - ii. A woman in the class understood the implications of what was being taught, and pushed back saying, “It *almost sounds like* you are saying that something we do (as Christians) could impact our salvation.” It became clear that she had been taught “once saved/ always saved,” and that what we do (works) can have nothing to do with our salvation, since we are saved only by what God has done for us.
  - iii. Her idea of faith was simply believing something at one point in time, as opposed to what we see in **Hebrews 11** and what Jesus is teaching here: the liberation will only come if we remain steadfast to Jesus’ teachings. We are saved by faith; however, we must understand what Biblical saving faith really is, as it is defined in Scripture. The righteous will live by faith; but that faith is an ongoing *way of life*.
- f. The world considers the teachings of Jesus to be oppressive, and it claims to offer us freedom. It offers freedom to do whatever you want regarding sexual immorality, drugs, alcohol, money, and living for pleasure in general.
- g. Let’s take another look at the offer of freedom held out by the world. Peter spoke of people like that, who were offering Christians a worldly type of “freedom” in his day:
  - i. “For when they speak great swelling words of emptiness, they allure through the lusts of the flesh, through lewdness, the ones who have actually escaped from those who live in error. While they promise them liberty, they themselves are slaves of corruption; for by whom a

person is overcome, by him also he is brought into bondage. For if, after they have escaped the pollutions of the world through the knowledge of the Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, they are again entangled in them and overcome, the latter end is worse for them than the beginning. For it would have been better for them not to have known the way of righteousness, than having known it, to turn from the holy commandment delivered to them. But it has happened to them according to the true proverb: 'A dog returns to his own vomit,' and, 'a sow, having washed, to her wallowing in the mire.'" (**2 Peter 2:18-22**, NKJV)

1. Living to indulge the flesh is described in the most repulsive terms by Peter.
    - a. The life of pleasure seeking is the life of a pig wallowing in mud (after it has been "washed", suggesting baptism).
    - b. Sin is like vomit that we throw up; going back to that way of life is not freedom; it is disgusting.
  2. Peter warns us that worldly freedom to indulge the flesh brings bondage, since by whatever we are overcome (including desires of the flesh), to that we are brought into bondage or slavery.
- h. Paul uses similar language, to explain what we were once slaves to.
- i. "For we ourselves were also once foolish, disobedient, deceived, serving various lusts and pleasures, living in malice and envy, hateful and hating one another. But when the kindness and the love of God our Savior toward man appeared, not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to His mercy He saved us, through the washing of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Spirit, whom He poured out on us abundantly through Jesus Christ our Savior, that having been justified by His grace we should become heirs according to the hope of eternal life." (**Titus 3:3-7**, NKJV)
    1. Paul says we were serving the various lusts and pleasures. They were not serving us; they had mastered us and turned us into slaves. Some translations (such as LEB and Douay-Rheims) even say "we were slaves to" or "we were enslaved by" the lusts and pleasures.
    2. Let us see these sins for what they are: Satan is using them to enslave us and control us.
  - ii. Consider what Paul said when he preached to Governor Felix, and the interesting reaction.

1. "And after some days, when Felix came with his wife Drusilla, who was Jewish, he sent for Paul and heard him concerning the faith in Christ. Now as he reasoned about righteousness, self-control, and the judgment to come, Felix was afraid and answered, 'Go away for now; when I have a convenient time I will call for you.'" (**Acts 24:24–25**, NKJV)
  2. The gospel message includes calling people to repent of living to indulge the flesh. It brings freedom from the control of the flesh; and calls us to a life of self-restraint. We must say "no" to the flesh. It appears that Felix was afraid of the message of the judgment to come, but he did not want to repent and live a life devoted to righteousness and self-control.
- i. Clement of Alexandria, a teacher in the church of Alexandria, Egypt (c. 150-215 AD) issued the challenge to the unbelievers of his day, to seek the true freedom.
- i. "And I would ask you, if it does not appear to you monstrous, that you men who are God's handiwork, who have received your souls from Him, and belong wholly to God, should be subject to another master, and, what is more, serve the tyrant instead of the rightful King—the evil one instead of the good?
  - ii. "For, in the name of truth, what man in his senses turns his back on good, and attaches himself to evil? What, then, is he who flees from God to consort with demons? Who, that may become a son of God, prefers to be in bondage? Or who is he that pursues his way to Erebus [*from Greek mythology, a god of the dark underworld -CP*], when it is in his power to be a citizen of heaven, and to cultivate Paradise, and walk about in heaven and partake of the tree of life and immortality, and, cleaving his way through the sky in the track of the luminous cloud, behold, like Elijah, the rain of salvation?
  - iii. "Some there are, who, like worms wallowing in marshes and mud in the streams of pleasure, feed on foolish and useless delights— men who are like pigs. For pigs, it is said, like mud better than pure water; and, according to Democritus, "are fond of dirt."
  - iv. "Let us not then be enslaved or become like pigs; but, as true children of the light, let us raise our eyes and look on the light, lest the Lord discover us to be spurious [*means false*]. ...Let us therefore repent, and pass from ignorance to knowledge, from foolishness to wisdom, from licentiousness to self-restraint, from unrighteousness to righteousness, from godlessness to God.



- v. "It is an enterprise of noble daring to take our way to God; and the enjoyment of many other good things is within the reach of the lovers of righteousness, who pursue eternal life, especially those things to which God Himself alludes, speaking by Isaiah: 'There is an inheritance for those who serve the LORD.' Noble and desirable is this inheritance: not gold, not silver, not clothing, which the moth assails, and things of earth which are assailed by the robber, whose eye is dazzled by worldly wealth; but it is that treasure of salvation to which we must hasten, by becoming lovers of the Word."
- vi. (Source: Clement of Alexandria, *Exhortation to the Heathen*; found in Ante-Nicene Fathers vol. 2, p. 198).

### III. Conclusions for Us

- a. Don't buy the lie of Satan that his world offers freedom and liberation. That is the same lie that he sold to Eve, in the beginning.
- b. See slavery and freedom as they really are. We are slaves to whatever has mastered us. That includes the flesh, and pleasure. Those who sin are slaves to sin.
- c. Realize that Christians walking in the light have true freedom. Jesus offers that freedom to those who live lives of faith, following His teachings and continuing on that path (even when weary and tested) all the way to the end.
- d. Remember that grace is not "unmerited favor" that covers unrighteous living. Rather, as Paul say:
  - i. "For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men, teaching us that, denying ungodliness and worldly lusts, we should live soberly, righteously, and godly in the present age," (**Titus 2:11-12**, NKJV)
- e. Don't go back to the old life of being a swamp-worm, a pig or a vomit-eating dog. Live free from sin; stay out of the mud and swamp. Don't eat the garbage or what you had vomited out.
- f. Take inventory of your life: are you being mastered by anything that is turning you into a slave?
  - i. Desires of the flesh: food, alcohol, drugs, you name it...
  - ii. Media, including internet (pornography, or any enslaving behavior that is taking away your freedom)
- g. Live a life of self-control, the life of a truly free person, and call others to it as well, just as Paul did to Felix.