

Chapter 1: What is Christian freedom?

‘If the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed’
(John 8:36)

Jesus spoke these words as He was arguing with the Jewish leaders, who were opposing Him. Some of the Jews, John tells us, did believe in Jesus. But there were others who did not want to receive Him, or His teaching, and they say to Jesus, ‘We are Abraham’s descendants and have never been slaves of anyone. How can you say that we shall be set free?’ (John 8:33). This was not true, because many times during their history the Jews had not been a free people (even at the time of Jesus the Jews were not free – they were under Roman rule). Jesus could have reminded them of that, but He doesn’t, because He was not talking about political freedom, but about being free from sin, as we see clearly from His answer, ‘Everyone who sins is a slave to sin’ (v. 34), and in verse 36 He also shows them the way out of this slavery.

That is the context of John 8:36. Now let me look in more detail at the verse itself. There are four points that I want to make:

1. We see a positive quality – freedom.
2. This freedom is described as being *real*, or *true* freedom.

Christian Freedom

3. We see who has this freedom – those who believe in Jesus.
4. We see who makes us free – Jesus Christ.

We can make the following conclusions from this:

1. That naturally every person is in a state of slavery.
2. That some people are set free from this slavery.
3. That they are set free by Christ.
4. That they are really and truly free.

We can say all this in one sentence:

‘Christ has real freedom, and He brings all true believers into this freedom.’

What kind of freedom are we talking about?

There are different kinds of freedom, for example, political freedom. Jesus is not talking about that in John 8:36. There is also sensual ‘freedom’, or license. This is what Paul speaks against in Galatians 5:13, ‘Do not use your freedom to indulge the sinful nature.’ It is a terrible thing when people abuse God’s grace, taking the opportunity to sin. We read about such people in Jude, verse 4. Such people are not true children of God.

The freedom that Jesus is talking about is spiritual freedom. Jesus has bought this freedom for us, and we are told to stand firm in this freedom (Gal. 5:1).

What are the characteristics of this freedom?

Let me say three things about this freedom:

1. It is real, not imaginary. Some people think they are free when they are not, but this freedom is real.

What is Christian Freedom?

2. It is complete freedom. We are set free from everything that we were slaves to: from Satan, from sin, from the law, from God's wrath, from death and from hell. This is true for every believer.
3. It is a permanent freedom. We never go back into slavery. We are now God's children, and will never go back to being slaves.

There are two stages to this freedom. There is the freedom we experience here in this life, and then there is the perfect freedom we will experience in heaven. But the freedom we have now is the beginning of that perfect freedom, and in this book we will try to understand more about what this means for us.

Firstly, let me talk about the *'negative'* aspects of our freedom as believers. By this I mean what we are set free *from*.

1. Freedom from Satan

It is clear that Jesus has delivered us from Satan, as it says in Hebrews 2:14-15, 'he [Christ] too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might destroy him who holds the power of death—that is, the devil—and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death.' By His mighty hand Jesus has rescued us from Satan, just as the Israelites were rescued out of Egypt.

2. Freedom from sin

By this I mean that we are free from the guilt of sin, we are washed clean from the pollution of sin, and we are no longer under the controlling power of sin. We are free from God's anger and condemnation. Jesus has taken these on Himself, and has paid for our sin. None of our sins can ever condemn

Christian Freedom

us, or put us under God's anger or God's curse. 'Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus' (Rom. 8:1).

This is what God has done, 'the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all' (Isa. 53:6). Jesus has taken all our sin, and has fully paid our debt. His resurrection proves that He did so, as Paul makes clear in Romans 8:33-34, 'Who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen? It is God who justifies. Who is he that condemns? Christ Jesus, who died—more than that, who was raised to life—is at the right hand of God, and is also interceding for us.' None of our sins will ever condemn us.

It is also true to say that none of our sins will ever bring upon us the anger of God and its consequences. We are free from the misery and the punishments which accompany God's anger at sin. God's attitude towards us now is one of constant mercy. None of God's anger will touch us.

Yes, God does discipline us when we sin. But there is an enormous difference between this, and experiencing God's anger. We have a different relationship with God now, and He has a different purpose in mind when He disciplines believers.

God never punishes us or brings difficulties into our lives as a way of 'making us pay' for our sin. This is impossible, because we know that Jesus has paid absolutely everything! When God does discipline us, it is like giving a sick person medicine. He does it to heal us, and make us better. This is not true for ungodly people – God punishes them as a holy Judge, not as a loving Father.

Everything God does to His people is motivated by His love for them. He disciplines them in love, and only for their good. This is not true for unbelievers. They are still under the anger and curse of God and He cannot forget their sin.

What is Christian Freedom?

We are also free from the controlling power of sin. ‘For sin shall not be your master’ (Rom. 6:14). Why not? ‘Because you are not under law, but under grace.’ When we were still under law, then sin was in control – and we were content for sin to control us. We went along with sin, just like a boat floats in the direction that the river flows. We also actively sinned personally, as our desires motivated us to do so. Now, however, Christ has set us free from the controlling power of sin.

However, we still have sin living in us, and this gives us much trouble and sadness. Sin can still cause disruption and harm, just as a defeated enemy often goes on fighting even after it is clear that he cannot win. A godly person can be more troubled by sin (even though it no longer controls him) than he was before he became a Christian. But the difference is this: sin may win a temporary victory, but sin is no longer in control. Sin is no longer king in the heart of a believer. The reign of sin is over, and the believer will never again be happy for sin to rule over him.

Augustine¹ describes four conditions that a person can be in regarding sin:

1. Before he knows the law he doesn’t fight against sin.
2. Under the law he fights against sin, but fails to defeat it.
3. Under grace he fights against sin and wins.
4. In heaven he has no more fight, only the enjoyment of victory.

What a wonderful position we are in as believers! Other people are under the control of sin, dictated to by their desires and passions, powerless against temptation. But we are not under

¹ Augustine of Hippo (354-430) became a prominent figure in the development of Western Christian theology, and a great defender of the sovereign grace of God in our salvation and in the living of the Christian life.

Christian Freedom

the controlling power of sin, we no longer enjoy sinning. Sin may win some victories over us, but it is no longer our master. Sin is dying more and more in us. On the cross Jesus fatally wounded sin, and from that moment it has been gradually dying. God has chosen to kill sin gradually, and one of the reasons for this is so that we will learn to rely on God daily for the strength to put sin to death in our lives.

3. Freedom from obeying people

The Bible seems to say in some places that we must obey men, and in other places that we must not. How do we understand this?

1. The Bible teaches that we should obey the laws of our country, unless we cannot do so without breaking God's law. That is how we should understand verses such as these:

- 'Everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God' (Rom. 13:1).
- 'Submit yourselves for the Lord's sake to every authority instituted among men: whether to the king as the supreme authority, or to governors, who are sent by him to punish those who do wrong and to commend those who do right. For it is God's will that by doing good you should silence the ignorant talk of foolish men' (1 Pet. 2:13-15).

2. The Bible also teaches that in spiritual things we have only one authority over us, and that is God Himself:

- 'And do not call anyone on earth "father," for you have one Father, and he is in heaven. Nor are you to be

called “teacher”, for you have one Teacher, the Christ’ (Matt. 23:9-10).

- ‘You were bought at a price; do not become slaves of men’ (1 Cor. 7:23).

There is only one master we should obey in spiritual matters, and He is in heaven. We must not allow any other person to rule over our conscience, and we should not obey anyone in the absolute sense in which we obey Jesus Christ. This is what it means to be free from obeying men.

4. Freedom from death

By this I mean that the believer is freed from death as a curse. For the believer death is now called ‘sleep’, and it is not something to be afraid of. The believer also knows that he will not die until it is God’s time, and therefore the right time, for him to die.

5. Freedom from the grave

This is actually part of the freedom we will enjoy in heaven. Although after death our bodies return to dust, those bodies will be raised to life again, and they will be perfect, glorious bodies, free from sickness and all imperfections, which will never die again. It will be the same body we had before, but made glorious, and our souls will be reunited with it. This is a mystery no-one can understand, but the Bible says it is so: ‘I myself will see him with my own eyes—I, and not another. How my heart yearns within me!’ (Job 19:27).

So far I have only spoken about the ‘negative’ side of freedom, or what we are freed *from*. Briefly let me say something about the ‘positive’ side of our freedom, or what we are freed *to*. This is not a complete list.

Christian Freedom

1. We are freed from a state of being under God's anger into a state of knowing God's mercy and favour (Eph. 2:1-10).
2. We are freed from a state of condemnation into a state of justification (Rom. 8:1).
3. We are freed from being God's enemies and have become His friends (Col. 1:21-22).
4. We are freed from being dead and are made alive (Eph. 2:1-5).
5. We are freed from sin to serve God (Luke 1:74). God paid our debt of sin so that we would be free to serve Him. If we don't realise that serving God is actually being free, then we also don't understand that sin is slavery. This means that we are still not really free.
6. We are freed from a spirit of slavery and given a spirit of sonship. Jesus Christ has redeemed us and made us sons of God. Now we serve God not out of fear, but out of love. Now we have a new nature, and new desires. Just as God's love for us motivated Him to save us, so our love for God motivates us to obey Him.
7. We are freed from death and hell, and brought to life and glory. Heaven is our inheritance, a place is being prepared there for us, and we are being prepared for it (Rom. 9:23). This is called the 'glorious freedom of the children of God' (Rom. 8:21). It is impossible for us fully to understand what this means (1 Cor. 2:9), but is described in the Bible as glory, joy, the Master's joy, the Father's house, the kingdom of glory, eternal life, eternal glory. This is the glorious freedom of the children of God!