

Will Jesus Take Away My Freedom?

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[0 : 0 0] Thank you, Aileen, for reading, and if I've not met you before, my name's Martin Ayres, I'm the minister here, and as Gordon said at the beginning, we're just looking at this, we're starting a series tonight, we're going to run just once a month in our evening service, big questions, and tonight the question, will Jesus take away my freedom, is the one we're looking at.

Now the blue cards that should have been inside your notice sheet had the Bible reading on that Aileen has just read for us, and on the other side there's some points on there that will just perhaps help you follow where I'm going, if you find that helpful.

What we're trying to do is deal with the questions that you might have in your head that leave you thinking, I don't want to become a Christian, or I couldn't become a Christian because of this.

When I lived in London, I used to bring friends to my church occasionally, to meetings, services, an opportunity for them to hear more about the Christian faith, and I remember one guy that I worked with, I was a lawyer, and I worked with this guy, and he'd studied a bit of religious studies at school, and so he used to grill me all the time with quite difficult questions.

What about other religions? Let's talk about that. What about suffering? Let's talk about that. But then one day, he said to me, probably after a few pints, he said, because he was disarmingly honest, he said to me, you know what Martin, I know I ask you all these questions, but I think my big issue really is, I think becoming a Christian would stop me living the way I want to live.

[1 : 3 0] So he saw Christians as people who'd had their freedom taken away. We can imagine looking at somebody in a little room with bars between us and them.

Again, that's how my friends saw Christians, trapped by God. But if you just read verse 31 with me, this is Jesus.

So to the Jews who had believed him, Jesus said, If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples, then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.

We might think Jesus is out to trap us. He thinks it's the other way around. He thinks that he's bringing us freedom. Which implies, of course, that left to ourselves, we need setting free.

In some way, we're trapped. I mentioned looking at someone behind bars. Of course, that person might be looking back at us. And to them, we're behind bars as well.

[2 : 3 9] The question is, which room is the prison cell, and which one is the room for visitors? It would be quite a surprise, wouldn't it, to turn around in our room and find that there's no way out.

And then to see the person we've been looking at get up and walk out the door of the visitor's room. That's the kind of reversal that Jesus wants to put on us here. And it's important that we think about that together.

So we're going to do that under two headings. First of all, the freedom that enslaves us. Jesus talks about freedom. The Jews who are listening to him understand that he's suggesting they're trapped.

They object. They say, we're not slaves. And Jesus answers them in verse 34. Jesus replied, very truly I tell you, everyone who sins is a slave to sin.

When we see that word sin there, we might think of, I guess, one of two things. We might think of something very trivial. Things that are sort of naughty but nice. Or we might be thinking of really bad stuff.

[3 : 50] Murder. Sexual abuse. People who are not like us. But in fact, what Jesus means by sin is simply building your life on anything except God.

See, if there's a God who made us, who loves us, it is only right that he would be entitled to ask us to build our lives on him.

But left to ourselves, what we all do is we choose something else to build our lives on instead of him. Something that we think will be more fulfilling. That will give us happiness.

Now put like that, sin sounds very liberating, doesn't it? Instead of building my life on God so that I have to live the way he wants me to live, I can choose something else, whatever I want, to build my life on.

I'm free. But Jesus says, if you sin, you're a slave to sin. Imagine a goldfish sitting on a side table in a little ball.

[4 : 56] It's got board in its ball. It's gone over the bridge a few times. It's gone under the bridge a few times. It thinks, I want to live in a lounge. So it takes a running wobble and it jumps out onto the lounge carpet.

Well, of course, it discovers that it's not very free at all. It's going to flap about on the carpet for a little while and then it's going to die. Jesus says that our freedom is just like that.

We say, I don't want you, God. I've found something else to live for that I think is going to make me happy. But we end up in a slavery to that thing, that substitute, on the way to death.

That's the big picture of what Jesus says here. We're just going to look at it in a few parts. How does this slavery work out? Well, it works out in our moral failure. Having turned away from God, we then do things against God.

We do things that God wouldn't like us to do. And Jesus says that we can't stop ourselves from doing that. Just think about it. Imagine saying to yourself, from now on, today, and for the rest of my life, I will always tell the truth.

[6 : 18] No white lies. Not even any spin just to make myself look a little bit better than I really am. Just try that. Maybe you try that tonight as an experiment. How long do you think you'll last?

Will you make it to next weekend, do you think? How about this? From now on, I will never have a lustful thought.

I'll never have an unfairly critical, judgmental thought about anybody. How long do you think we would last? Maybe we'd make it to Tuesday?

If we're being honest. So the heart of this slavery is that we're trapped in wanting to reject God. We've turned away from him and we are unable to live in the way he would want us to.

Now why is that? Well, that's my second subheading there on the cards. The heart of our slavery. Jesus says that anyone who sins is a slave to sin.

[7 : 18] The problem is that whatever you choose to live for will enslave you. If we don't build our lives on God, which we might think of as slavery, we will choose something else to love and serve instead.

And we kind of make that into our God. The Bible calls this idolatry. Choosing something else to be our God. It might be a very good thing. It might be a partner.

Or a family. Or your career. Your studies. Your home. But when we... So it's a good thing. But when we make it into our ultimate thing, it shapes our behaviour.

I'm guessing most of us have seen Star Wars. I just got round the other week to watching the newest film, The Force Awakens. And I was telling a friend how much more I'd enjoyed it than the three prequels that were made a few years ago.

And my friend pointed out, he said, the thing that the problem for the three prequels, to be fair, was it's hard to write, make a trilogy of films where you know they're going to end in disaster.

[8 : 26] And the disaster, if you don't know the story, is the making of Darth Vader, this kind of arch baddie. In the prequels, he's Anakin Skywalker, the boy hero.

He's the good guy. But you know, from what you've seen before, that by episode four, Anakin will have turned into the great enemy, evil personified Lord Vader.

So how is this heroic young man going to become a monster? Well, the answer in the films is really surprising. Anakin doesn't wake up one day and decide, I'm going to be bad from now on.

I'm going to love bad things. No, the problem is that he loves something good, but he loves it too much. It's actually his wife. He loves his wife so much, that when he was troubled that she was going to die, he was willing to do anything to save her.

She'd become his God. He was willing to do things that he would normally have realised were morally wrong, in his desperation to love and serve her and keep her alive.

[9 : 35] Taking a good thing he was supposed to love, his wife, but making her the ultimate thing. So his ideas about right and wrong changed. And from an objective point of view, he'd become evil.

It's just a picture, but it sheds a light on how we all behave when there's something that we love that much. If you make something your ultimate thing, so that you think, if only I could have this, I'd be truly happy.

Or if only I could have more of this, it would fulfil me. It changes your behaviour. You sacrifice other things to get that. It's great to have a career.

But if you think your career is what will give you ultimate fulfilment, you sacrifice other interests, perhaps even other duties, for it.

It's great to have friends. But if you think that being accepted by a group of people and have them admire you is what will make you truly happy, you start behaving in a way that you wouldn't necessarily think was truly right, but you behave that way because you think it will gain you acceptance from those people.

[10 : 48] Really, that's why peer pressure works. And to live like that is not good for us. Idols, false gods like that, leave us totally insecure.

If you make popularity or career or respect your ultimate thing, if you become very good at it, you'll become very proud and obnoxious. And if you fail, you fall into absolute despair.

So we end up striving and striving. So what does all of that mean? It means that in a very real sense, none of us is actually free at all.

Whenever we make choices in our lives, we get enslaved by our own desires. We might feel free whenever we've got a choice to how am I going to spend my time today, how am I going to spend my money.

But our choices are driven by what we think deep down in our hearts will make us truly happy. And because of that, we're actually trapped. Trapped, facing away from God.

[11 : 53] Now you might be listening to me on this and thinking, well I don't feel trapped. I'm free. So let me just give an example of this. Let me make it impersonal.

Imagine somebody else who's not a Christian. I'm talking to them. I say, you're trapped. They say, no I'm not, I'm free. Okay, if you're free, become a Christian.

No. Why not? Because I don't want to. Okay. If you're free, change what you want so that you want to become a Christian and then become one.

No. Why not? I don't want to do that. See, at the level of our desires, we're enslaved to other things that we think will make us happy, not Jesus.

And we're stuck away from God. I do realise, by the way, that you might have other reasons why you are not a Christian. You might want to talk about evidence and I love talking about the evidence for the Christian faith.

[13 : 11] If you've got other questions, then I'd love to make the time with you to explore your questions. But you see, what Jesus is saying here is that when we decide not to be a Christian, there's something much more fundamental going on.

At the level of desire, we've enslaved ourselves to masters that we think will make us happy and that mean we can't turn back to God. And before we move on to the positive, I just need to mention the end result of that.

We're just sampling a long conversation here that Jesus was having with these original hearers. But just let me read verse 24 of chapter 8. It'll come on the screen. Verse 24.

He said, I told you that you would die in your sins. If you do not believe that I am he, you will indeed die in your sins. Kathy and I moved at Christmas time to Glasgow.

All our possessions were put in a van. They were driven to Glasgow. We arrived in our possessions. They were moved into the house as we walked in.

[14 : 21] Jesus warns us here that if we live a life away from God, we will die in that state. And God will hold us to account for having rejected him.

The goldfish jumps out of the bowl, flaps around on the carpet for a bit, and then dies. Jesus says, we make a bid for freedom, freedom.

We choose something else to build our lives on, but it will end up in death. So having talked about that, let's go on to number two.

We've looked at the freedom that enslaves us. Secondly, the slavery that frees us. To the Jews who believed him, Jesus said, if you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples, then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.

Did you notice what Jesus said there? This isn't just about a couple of extra rules in your life. If you became a Christian, it might affect your sex life, it might affect how much you drink. He says, if you hold to my teaching, it's literally, if you abide in my word, this idea of living in Jesus' guidance, and teaching, and truth, it affects every area of your life.

[15 : 42] We become, if you like, his slaves. But Jesus says, if you're willing to do that, you'll find true freedom. It doesn't sound like freedom, does it?

So let's just unpack what Jesus means here. First of all, it's freedom to know God. He says, if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed.

Jesus contrasts being a slave to being a son. He was a son. And the point is that if you're a son, a child, in someone's family, you're different in your status to a slave.

You have a security. You live in love in the relationships. And Jesus is saying, I'm the Son of God, and if you're with me, I'll make you into children of God.

You'll have a place of security in God's love. He's saying, I can turn you around. On your own, you can't do that. I can give you acceptance by God so that you will know him as your father.

[16 : 46] It looks like a slave relationship. It's not that. It's a father-daughter relationship, father-son relationship, a loving, intimate, personal relationship with God.

Freedom to know him. And secondly, it's freedom to live as we were made to live. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.

Jesus says the truth is that we were made to know God, and he can take you back into that reality. He can change us so that we turn back to the true relationship that we were made for.

It's not perfect now if you do that. It doesn't start perfect. It will be perfect one day, but it starts right away, a relationship with God.

If you think back to that goldfish, imagine picking it up and putting it back in the bowl. It swims around again. It loses its freedom to live in the air.

[17 : 54] It's constrained now by the bowl. But it's back where it belongs. And so it is for us. Jesus offers us a way back to God.

We lose our freedom to choose what else to serve instead. There are constraints, as Jesus says, hold to my teaching, but that's okay because some freedoms are not good for us, and we need to get back where we truly belong.

I mentioned at the beginning a friend of mine, a colleague, who said, if I became a Christian, I would lose my freedom.

Just worth thinking, isn't it? If you think like that about the Christian faith, you'd have thought it would make you less happy to be a Christian. There was a survey earlier this year, just a few months ago, where people's happiness was measured, and they were asked, as well as measuring their happiness, for their worldview.

They measured, are you happy? Life satisfaction? Do you feel that what you're doing with your life is worthwhile? And the headline was that Christians are happier than non-religious people.

[19 : 08] That's what was found. Now, I don't know how you measure these things. I'm sure there's a lot of subjectivity involved in that. But the thing is, if all Jesus did was take away your freedom, we would never expect that to be the case, would we?

I want to suggest that what makes a finding like that plausible, what makes it make sense, is actually if our freedom away from God is enslaving. And if what Jesus offers us is in fact true freedom, freedom to know God, freedom to live as we were always made to live.

Just a final word on how Jesus does that for us. There's a danger that you'd hear what I've said so far and think, well, if Jesus is right, I'd better get on with keeping those rules that Jesus has.

But that's not what Jesus offers us. Do you remember what he said about us? The problem is, we're enslaved. And a slave can't say, I've had enough of this now, I'm going to head off to the Bahamas.

He's a slave. And slaves have to be rescued. And so, if we want this freedom that Jesus offers, we have to go to Jesus.

[20 : 28] He explained that it was by him coming and dying the death that we deserve that he's bought us our freedom. But we have to come to him and say, Jesus, please set me free.

You could do that today if you want to. If you've never done that, I'd love to encourage you to come to Jesus Christ. You might have more questions, you might want to discuss it further. I'm going to be around afterwards.

I'd love to talk to you more if you'd like to talk more about that. Thank you.