

Are We Really Free?

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Six days you shall do your work, but on the seventh day you shall rest, so that your ox and your donkey may have relief, and your homeborn slave and the resident alien may be refreshed. ¹³ Be attentive to all that I have said to you. Do not invoke the names of other gods; do not let them be heard on your lips. (Exodus 23:12-13) Then Jesus said to the Jews who had believed in him, “If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples; ³² and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.” ³³ They answered him, “We are descendants of Abraham and have never been slaves to anyone. What do you mean by saying, ‘You will be made free’?” ³⁴ Jesus answered them, “Very truly, I tell you, everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin. ³⁵ The slave does not have a permanent place in the household; the son has a place there forever. ³⁶ So if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed. (John 8:31-36)

1. God's Greatest Gift

If someone were to ask you, what God's greatest gift to Adam and Eve is, what would you say? If I were Adam, I would say that God's greatest gift would be free will. God grants Adam and Eve the freedom to choose or reject God. Without the freedom, God would be a dictator and humans would be merely God's puppets.

When God gives the Ten Commandments to the Israelites at Mt. Sinai, God does not demand the people to obey the commandments. Instead, God says to Moses, “***If you obey the commandments of the Lord your God that I am commanding you today, by loving the Lord your God, walking in his ways, and observing his commandments, decrees, and ordinances, then you shall live and become numerous, and the Lord your God will bless you in the land that you are entering to possess. ¹⁷ But if your heart turns away and you do not hear, but are led astray to bow down to other gods and serve them, ¹⁸ I declare to you today that you shall perish; you shall not live long in the land that you are crossing the Jordan to enter and possess***” (Deuteronomy 30:16-18).

Even in the Ten Commandments, God does not force his will on God's people but lets them decide to follow or not. God gave the Israelites and gives us a choice, to choose between observing and not observing his commandments. The freedom to choose is God's greatest gift for humankind.

This past Thursday, Americans celebrated the anniversary of the U.S. independence from Great Britain in July 1776. When the American Revolutionary War broke in April 1775, a few colonists fought to become completely independent from Great Britain. When the Continental Congress met

at the Pennsylvania State House in Philadelphia, the Virginia delegate Richard Henry Lee introduced a motion calling for the 13 colonies' independence.

The colonists gathered together and on July 2, 1776, the Continental Congress voted in favor of Lee's resolution for independence. The final wording of the Declaration of Independence was approved on July 4, 1776 by the delegates from the 13 colonies. From then on, July 4th has become the day we celebrate the birth of America's independence. The holiday became a federal holiday in 1941. As we remember the U.S. independence, I would like to ask a deeper question about freedom. The question is "are we truly free?"

2. Truth Will Make Us Free

John 8:32-34 is a dialogue between Jesus and some of his Jewish followers in Jerusalem. Jesus says to them, "***If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples; you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.***" They say, "***We are descendants of Abraham and have never been slaves to anyone. What do you mean by saying, 'You will be made free'?***" Jesus says, "***Very truly, I tell you, everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin.***"

Jesus tells his followers and us that everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin. That means that everyone is a sinner and needs to be free. How can we be free? Jesus says that if we know the truth, the truth will make us free. What then is "the truth?" This question is raised by Pilate when he examines Jesus before the crucifixion (John 18:38). Jesus does not answer the question, but Jesus says that he has come to testify to the truth (18:37).

In John's gospel, the truth is introduced in two different ways. Jesus prays for his disciples in John 17:17, "***sanctify them by the truth: your word is truth.***" Firstly, truth is God's word. Second, truth is Jesus himself. In John 14:6, Jesus says, "***I am the way and the truth and the life.***" If we put the two meanings of truth together, "truth" would be God's word concerning Jesus.

What then does it mean in the phrase, "the truth will set you free" (John 8:32)?" According to John 8:23-30, Jesus' message brings many Jews to believe in him. The people believe that Jesus is the one sent by God to be the Messiah. The people accept this as truth. And they accept Jesus' teachings as truth. The phrase, "know the truth" means then to grasp the revelation of God in Christ.

When we read, "the truth will set you free," the Bible tells us that understanding and believing in who Jesus is releases us from the slavery of sin. Verse 36 says, "if the son sets you free, you will be free indeed." Jesus is the one who forgives sins and gives eternal life. John 3:16 says, "***God so loved the world that he gave his only son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.***" In this, we see that becoming a disciple of Jesus means receiving God's forgiveness through Jesus and to be set free

from the slavery of sin. But we need to remember a saying, “freedom is not free.” Jesus paid the price by dying on the cross.

3. How to Be Free

How can we maintain that we are set free from the bondage of sin? John 8:31 says, “***If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples.***” The NIV version says, “***if you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples.***” Being disciples of Jesus means that we not only understand who Jesus is but also that we have a firm relationship with Jesus’ word.

How can we have a firm relationship with the Lord? God teaches the Israelites a way to keep the intimate relationship with the Lord. God wants His people to take a break from their routine lives on the seventh day and remember who God is and what God has done for His people.

4. Rest and Remember

In Exodus 23:12, God says to Moses, “***Six days you shall do your work, but on the seventh day you shall rest, so that your ox and your donkey may have relief, and your homeborn slave and the resident alien may be refreshed.***”

The seventh day is a day set aside for rest and refreshment. This is the day that humans stop the routine activities of life and are refreshed by remembering who God is and who we are as people of God. When the Israelites stop their regular activities, God reminds them of how God has been taking care of them the whole time. When we rest, God reminds us of our purpose in this world and our dependence on God as the one who is in control and leads the entire world.

The importance of observing the Sabbath is mentioned at the very beginning of the Bible. Genesis 2:2-3 says, “***on the seventh day God finished the work that he had done, and he rested on the seventh day from all the work that he had done. 3 So God blessed the seventh day and hallowed it, because on it God rested from all the work that he had done in creation.***”

In Genesis, God does not explicitly command God’s people to observe the Sabbath. However, later in Exodus 20:8, God declares that the Israelites should “***remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy.***”

The words “rest” and “remember” are two important words in these passages. God rests not because of physical tiredness but because God’s creative work is complete. God tells us that God rested and that all people, as an extension, would also need to rest. When we rest, we remember that we can’t live without the Lord and that God is the one that is in control of all things.

Prior to the rebuilding of Israel as a country in 1948, the people of Israel spent 2,000 years scattered across the world. Yet despite the thousands of years living outside of their home country, the Jews observed the Sabbath

generation after generation. For the Jewish people, the Sabbath is a reminder of their identity as God's chosen people.

The Sabbath is the 4th commandment in the ten commandments. Exodus 31:14 says, "***You shall keep the Sabbath, because it is holy for you; everyone who profanes it shall be put to death; whoever does any work on it shall be cut off from among the people.***" God tells Moses to put people to death and banish them from the people of Israel in order to convey the seriousness about keeping the Sabbath as part of being God's people.

5. Sunday Worship Service

Today, Christians and Jews remember the Sabbath on different days, Saturdays for Jews and Sundays for Christians. How did this happen? When Jesus rose from the dead on the third day, he rose on the first day of the week, Sunday. Acts 20:7 says, "***On the first day of the week, when we met to break bread, Paul was holding a discussion with them.***"

This is the first time that we see in the Bible that Christians met on the first day of the week for the purpose of breaking bread and worship together. The first day of the week is therefore called "the Lord's day" (Revelation 1:10). Christians' gathering to worship on Sundays is important as much as the Israelites observe the sabbath. We celebrate the resurrection of Jesus on Sundays and remember what God has done for us.

6. Conclusion

This morning, if I ask a question "are we really free?" what would you say? John 8:36 says, "***if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed.***" This verse says that Jesus has set us free. It means that we are set free not only from sin and death but also from the yoke of the law. We have received true freedom through Jesus.

7. Application

What difference does true freedom make? Matthew 11:28 says, "***Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest.***" Everyone has some kinds of concerns, burdens, sickness, worries, uncertainty, obsessions, and depressions.

How can we be free from these issues? My daughter stayed with us for two weeks. We are not for sure what her future would be. Someone says, "I give my fears and worries to God. And I let him take over. God is good, all the time." I would say the same to the Lord about my daughter.

Jesus frees us from all kinds of issues. The rest that Jesus promises is love, forgiveness, relationship, restoration, healing, and providence. When we stop our routine activities once a week and rest with Jesus, God will set us free from all kinds of concerns. He will fill us with his peace. Amen.