

Freedom in Jesus Christ

John 8:31-38

April 24, 2022

It is the Sunday after Easter. Something miraculous has happened. But it took a while for even Jesus's disciples to come to an understanding of what had happened. It was astounding, and difficult to believe. In *Luke* we read how two disciples on the road to Emmaus had apparently heard Mary's report of the empty tomb, but did not fathom what it meant, until they recognized Jesus himself (*Luke* 24:13-35). In John's gospel, the disciples had locked the doors for their safety. Jesus appeared among them. They had to see him themselves, and hear his voice, to understand that he really was there with them. Thomas heard them tell of this, but he couldn't believe until he, too, was in the presence of Jesus (*John* 20: 19-28).

Given how hard it was to understand what Jesus was about after the Resurrection, it's not surprising that people didn't understand his mission earlier. In today's Bible Study lesson from the *Gospel of John*, Jesus is talking to some Jews who were former followers. Initially, it was unclear who Jesus was. Because of his miracles, many believed that he was the Messiah they had hoped for. The Messiah they expected would set the world right, overthrow the tyranny of the Romans, establish David's Kingdom in Jerusalem, and reign over all of the world. But as Jesus came closer to Holy Week, many of those followers turned away. Jesus was talking about taking up his cross. Surely that wasn't where he was going! It didn't make sense. It was only in hindsight, after the Resurrection, that the meaning of Jesus and what he had done began to be understood. Even then, there were disagreements. Had Jesus come for the benefit of just the Jews, or also the Gentiles? Would Gentiles have to become Jews to be saved? That particular issue wasn't truly resolved for decades.

John Chapters 7 and 8 show Jesus in Jerusalem at the Feast of Tabernacles, or feast of Booths. It is interesting that Jesus tells his brothers (who do not believe in him) that he is not going to go to the festival. But after they leave, he also went, and during the middle of the festival appeared in the Temple and began to teach. There were disagreements about Jesus; some believed, others didn't. In Chapter 8, just before today's scripture reading, we read,

21 Again he said to them, “I am going away, and you will search for me, but you will die in your sin. Where I am going, you cannot come.” **22** Then the Jews said, “Is he going to kill himself? Is that what he means by saying, ‘Where I am going, you cannot come’?” **23** He said to them, “You are from below, I am from above; you are of this world, I am not of this world. **24** I told you that you would die in your sins, for you will die in your sins unless you believe that I am he.”^[a] **25** They said to him, “Who are you?” Jesus said to them, “Why do I speak to you at all?”^[b] **26** I have much to say about you and much to condemn; but the one who sent me is true, and I declare to the world what I have heard from him.” **27** They did not understand that he was speaking to them about the Father. **28** So Jesus said, “When you have lifted up the Son of Man, then you will realize that I am he,^[c] and that I do nothing on my own, but I speak these things as the Father instructed me. **29** And the one who sent me is with me; he has not left me alone, for I always do what is pleasing to him.” **30** As he was saying these things, many believed in him.

a. [John 8:24](#) Gk I am

b. [John 8:25](#) Or What I have told you from the beginning

c. [John 8:28](#) Gk I am

This is typical of Jesus’s discourses in *John*. You may recall Jesus’s conversation with Nicodemus. Jesus says “You must be born again” (or anew) and Nicodemus takes that literally, and seems confused. The same thing is happening here. They are like the men on the road to Emmaus, talking to Jesus back and forth for hours, but not recognizing him. As *John* says in several places, Jesus’s time had not yet come. It would be later that the veil over who he was and what he was doing would be lifted. This brings us to our scripture, which immediately follows that above:

31 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. ³⁷ I know that you are descendants of Abraham; yet you look for an opportunity to kill me, because there is no place in you for my word. ³⁸ I declare what I have seen in the Father’s presence; as for you, you should do what you have heard from the Father.”^[a]

a. [John 8:38](#) Other ancient authorities read *you do what you have heard from your father*

This is a bit confusing. Why would Jesus be condemning Jews who had believed in him? Shouldn’t their belief be applauded? I think the answer is in a strict reading of the grammar in verse 31: “³¹ **Then Jesus said to the Jews who had believed in him, ...**” Here the word “had” seems to mean that these who Jesus is addressing starting in verse 31 are the Jews who once had been believers, but were believers no more. They had hoped that he was the Messiah they were seeking, but now they have decided he isn’t. This conversation goes on for quite a bit, with Jesus talking about himself and his mission, and those he is talking to not understanding and even thinking he might be a demon, or a mad man like an earlier Samaritan claimant to be Messiah, a magician named Dositheus.

The reference to Abraham is a bit obscure and difficult to understand. Here is a good explanation that I found: “The Pharisees, unlike the Zealots, did not look for political freedom for they agreed with Jesus that God’s gift of freedom came from obeying his will. But they regarded this freedom as their birthright, as Abraham’s descendants who kept their national privilege of studying the Torah.” (Arthur John Gossip, *The Interpreter’s Bible*, v. 8, p. 601 Exegesis on *John*) Jesus is making the point that the Jews indeed have that freedom about which he speaks, if they but follow Abraham’s example. They have the Torah. But, many Jews turned away. The Zealots, for example, looked to an earthly kingdom that would give them political autonomy or even world domination. Other Jews sought God, but refused to believe the Messiah could come from Galilee. Not as bad as a Samaritan, but close. Others didn’t see how Jesus could be a descendant of David, since Jesus was from Galilee instead of Bethlehem. In the end, the conversation turned ugly:

⁵⁶ Your ancestor Abraham rejoiced that he would see my day; he saw it and was glad.” ⁵⁷ Then the Jews said to him, “You are not yet fifty years old, and have you seen Abraham?”^[a] ⁵⁸ Jesus said to them, “Very truly, I tell you, before Abraham was, I am.” ⁵⁹ So they picked up stones to throw at him, but Jesus hid himself and went out of the temple.

a. [John 8:57](#) Other ancient authorities read *has Abraham seen you?*

The words “Light” and “Darkness,” and “Freedom” and “Slavery,” and “Truth” and a lack of truth, have multiple meanings in John’s gospel. There is the simple objective common meanings, but beyond that symbolic meanings, and yet further, deep meanings that go beyond human understanding. This was certainly true in Jesus’s time. Over and over again, Jesus is speaking of these things from a religious or theological perspective, and the Jews he is talking to refuse to follow beyond a literal, materialistic, understanding. Not just the Jews. When Jesus appears before the governor, Pontus Pilate, (*John 18:37b*) Jesus says, **“For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice.”** ³⁸ Pilate asked him, “What is truth?”

Pilate’s response, “What is truth,” was a rhetorical question. He didn’t expect an answer. To him, “truth” was an abstraction that was an arbitrary definition. The Roman emperor said he was a god. So, for Pilate, that was truth. The Emperor had the power to enforce that truth. Now this Jesus came before him proclaiming some other truth. It was just another claim to persuade others, from Pilate’s viewpoint. He wasn’t bothered by it. Truth was whatever someone wanted to claim it was, for that person. Nothing wrong with that. Pilate went back to the Jewish leaders and told them, “I find no case against him.” (*John 18:38b*) That, at least, is how I read Pilate’s response. Concerning “Truth,” he is cynical and jaded.

This is what we see in the world today. “Truth” is treated by the secular leaders of our day as something to be defined to fit one’s own needs. Right now, people are being jailed in Russia for speaking about what is in fact happening in Ukraine, and it is being labeled as Untruth because it conflicts with the ruling regime’s definition of what is true, which suits their own purposes. In China telling the actual truth can cause one to be arrested and jailed or worse. It’s a feature of totalitarian regimes. Also for other powers that want to bend others to their will.

One of the somewhat obscure ideas in the New Testament (Mark, Matthew and Luke) is the idea that blasphemy against the Holy Spirit is an “unforgivable sin.”

Mark 3: ²⁸ “Truly I tell you, people will be forgiven for their sins and whatever blasphemies they utter; ²⁹ but whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit can never have forgiveness, but is guilty of an eternal sin”

This seems arbitrary, but it isn't. God's Holy Spirit is what speaks to truth to us. If we call God, and the Holy Spirit evil, how can we ever perceive the good? The point isn't that this offense is so horrible. Unlike murder, torture and such, it mostly harms the person committing it. That's because if one calls good evil and evil good, one closes the door to understanding. It cuts oneself off from God. God continued to reach out, but if a soul decides to turn his back on God by labeling those things good as evil, and pursues evil as if it were virtue, how can God be heard? We can but pray that those who choose this path somehow experience God's truth, and turn away from their evil ways.

If we accept that relationship with God through Jesus, we are free of constraints that would otherwise bind us. We do not have to fear what the world will throw at us. We do not have to fear for our souls over mistakes we may make. Yes, we may have difficulties, we may be imprisoned, or even die. But we have freedom to follow Jesus, wherever we are. Yes, that's abstract. We do live in a real world where bad things can happen. But with faith in God through Jesus, we know that God walks with us and will save us. Our freedom will be complete, for we are promised that we will be children of God, not bound in slavery to the devil or to sin.

I find *John* hard to follow, and the concepts sometimes a bit too abstract to understand. But we have the reassurance that we don't have to understand all of this to be saved. Salvation is not about being intelligent, or even wise, or especially perceptive. It's about recognizing ourselves as mortal, finite creatures who need God, rather than needing to be masters of and dominate the world or others around us. Let us put our faith in God, and store up treasures in heaven by our faithfulness to God, and following how he would have us live on Earth.

Prayer: God who liberates, help us long for the kind of freedom you have for us. Give us perspective on our culture's view of freedom, and loosen our ties to patterns of life that keep us from being the people you created us to be. Jesus, help us grow in our understanding of what it looks like to abide in you. Amen.