

The Truth

Will Set You Free (John 8:30-32)

by Bob Wilkin

INTRODUCTION

Often this passage is misconstrued to teach that there is such a thing as people who believe in Jesus and yet are not born again because their belief does not result in perseverance. Yet the passage teaches a remarkably different message that should not be missed.

This passage shows that the Free Grace position does not promote sin. It promotes holiness. The only way to escape the clutches of sin's bondage at the practical level is by abiding in Christ and His truth. Doctrine matters.

The issue in this passage is whether those who believe in Jesus will experience freedom from sin's bondage. While we are free positionally (Romans 6), we only will be free in our experience if God's Word takes up residence (Robert Munger: *My Heart, Christ's Home*).

THESE ARE REAL BELIEVERS

Notice that it is the Apostle John, not the new believers themselves, who says that they believed in Jesus. John says this not once, but twice. Thus if we take the text at face value, these people are born again. They are what some would call *real believers*. I don't like that expression since it tends to convey different types of faith (head vs. heart faith, Spirit-generated vs. flesh-generated, miracle faith vs. repentant faith, etc.). In any case, these people really believe.

But this is not the way that most commentators understand these verses. In fact, commentators are nearly united in belief that these are *false professors* who have a sort of faith, *miracle faith* some call it, that is not *true faith*.

D. A. Carson concludes concerning the faith in John 8:30-32:

John had already introduced the theme of fickle faith. In 2:23, the many people who believed in his name when they saw the miraculous signs Jesus was doing turn out to have untrustworthy faith (2:24-25)...Some believe in Jesus: whether or not their faith is genuine cannot be determined by the linguistic expression selected by the Evangelist. But Jesus now lays down exactly what it is that separates spurious faith from true faith, fickle disciples from genuine disciples: *If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples* [italics his]. The verb rendered 'hold' is *meno*,, to abide, to remain—a theme of critical importance that returns in a concentrated way in chapter 15. *In short, perseverance is the mark of true faith* [italics added], of real disciples. A genuine believer remains in Jesus' 'word' (logos), his teaching (cf. notes on 1:1): i.e. such a person obeys it, seeks to understand it better, and finds it more precious, more controlling, precisely when other forces flatly oppose it" (*The Gospel According to John*, Eerdmans, 1991, pp. 347-48).

Leon Morris discusses several interpretations which he ultimately rejects including the following:

1. The faith in John 8:30 is real faith and that in John 8:31 is false.
2. The faith in both John 8:30 and 31 is real.
3. These are not the words of John at all, but the words of a clumsy redactor.

Morris then gives his view, which is the same as that of Carson:

It is best to think that John is speaking of men who had made an outward profession, but that in this particular case it did not go very deep. Jesus' words then are meant to drive home to formal and casual adherents something of the meaning of true discipleship. If men in any sense believe in Him it is important that they be led to see *what real faith means* [italics added] (*The Gospel According to John*, Eerdmans, 1971, p. 455).

A few sentences later Morris adds, "the test [of real faith] is 'abiding'" (p. 456).

If these are indeed genuine believers, contrary to what most commentators say, then how do we explain what the Lord says in the verses which immediately follow John 8:30-32? Note what Jesus goes on to say to "them":

"You seek to kill Me, because My word has no place in you" (8:37).

"You seek to kill Me" (8:40).

"You are of your father, the devil" (8:44).

"You do not believe Me" (8:45).

"Why do you not believe Me?" (8:46).

"You are not of God" (8:47).

"I do not have a demon; but I honor My Father, and you dishonor Me" (8:49).

First, it is clear that the people in vv 33-47 are *not* the same as those in vv 30-32. In vv 30-31, John twice says that the people to whom he was referring believed in Jesus. Yet in vv 45-46, the Lord says that the people He was speaking to did not believe Him. These must be two different groups or else John did not realize he was contradicting himself, which is impossible since this is Scripture.

Second, if we follow the third person plurals (they, them) in the entire chapter, we find that there is a larger hostile group that runs through the whole chapter (see John 8:2, 4, 6, 7, 12, 14, 19, 21, 23, 25, 27, 28, 33, 34, 39, 41, 42, 59) and there is a smaller group in vv 30-32 that believes in Jesus. Clearly vv 30-32 are parenthetical. Verse 33 resumes the discussion with the hostile group.

Third, being a disciple of Jesus is not the same as being a believer in Jesus. In order to believe in Jesus one must simply believe in Him. In order to be a disciple of Jesus one must abide in His teachings, which includes, of course, the teaching of His Apostles. The reason why commentators stumble here is because they equate the condition of discipleship with the condition of regeneration.

Fourth, John 3:16 says that "whoever believes in Him" has everlasting life. And the Apostle John in 8:30 says that "many believed in Him." The Greek is identical. Thus those in v 30 have everlasting life. Otherwise John again is not only sloppy, but contradicts himself, which is impossible.

Fifth, as Carson shows, this understanding of John 8:30-32 is influenced by one's understanding of John 2:23-25. If one misinterprets John 2:23-25, he will then bring his faulty interpretation to John 8:30-32, which is simpler and clearer. This is reversing the analogy of faith.

Sixth, the experience of freedom from bondage to sin is not something all believers enjoy. To equate that freedom with the new birth is a serious error. The following sections explore more carefully this issue of freedom from sin's bondage.

FREEDOM (EXPERIENTIAL) FROM SIN'S BONDAGE, NOT FREEDOM FROM THE PENALTY OF SIN, IS IN VIEW

If one reads vv 30-32 without prejudice, the interpretation is clear: Those who believe in Jesus are capable of being set free, but that freedom only emerges as the believer abides in Jesus' teachings.

This is borne out by the exchange that follows. First, the unbelieving Jews in the larger audience say, "We have never been in bondage to anyone" (v 33). Second, Jesus says, "Whoever commits sin is a slave of sin" (v 34). Therefore, the issue in v 32 of being set free is being set free from slavery to sin.

Let's now consider the issue of abiding in order to be set free.

FREEDOM (EXPERIENTIAL) FROM SIN'S BONDAGE REQUIRES ABIDING IN GOD'S WORD

Here and in Romans 6, we find that abiding in Jesus' teachings is necessary in order to experience freedom from sin's bondage. In both places we find that believers are not automatically set free in their experience from sin's bondage.

In vv 31-36 the Lord touches on both kinds of freedom from sin's bondage, positional (vv 34-36, speaking to unbelievers) and experiential (vv 31-32, speaking to believers). Paul gives a detailed explanation in Romans 6.

"Whoever sins is a slave of sin" is parallel to 1 John 3:9. The born-of-God part of us never sins. Sin comes from the flesh, not the new birth. Obviously everyone sins (Rom 3:23; 1 John 1:8, 10). But that is not what the Lord is saying here. He is saying that there is such a thing as someone who is, in his position, free from sin and never sins as an expression of that inner self, often called the new nature.

Unbelievers need to be set free from bondage to sin in their experience. But believers need to experience that freedom. That is clear in John 8:31-32 and Romans 6:

"He who has died has been freed from sin" (Rom 6:7).

"Reckon yourself to be dead indeed to sin" (Rom 6:11).

"Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal bodies" (Rom 6:12).

"Sin shall not have dominion over you" (Rom 6:14).

"You were [before the new birth] slaves of sin" (Rom 6:17).

"Having been set free from sin, you became slaves of righteousness" (Rom 6:18).

"Present your members as slaves of righteousness for holiness" (Rom 6:19).

"When [before the new birth] you were slaves of sin" (Rom 6:20).

"Having been set free from sin and having become slaves of God" (Rom 6:22).

It is impossible to read Romans 6 without seeing that there are two types of freedom from sin's bondage, experiential (Rom 6:11, 12, 16, 19) and positional (Rom 6:7, 14, 17, 18, 20, 22).

And we find in both Romans 6 and John 8 that the means to this victory is by abiding in the teachings of Jesus and His Apostles. Romans 6 is all about how we view ourselves. Do we see ourselves in light of God's Word? Or do we view ourselves in light of what the world says about us?

I remember when the book *Birthright* by David Needham came out. I read it and went to Zane and told him I didn't like it because it promoted Lordship Salvation. I was shocked by Zane's reply. He told me something like this:

Lordship Salvation is not the point of the book, though it is there. The real point of the book is a fantastic point and hence this is a fantastic book. Needham argues that believers are at the core of their beings sinless. He argues that believers should not see themselves as slaves of sin, but as slaves of righteousness. Needham rightly argues that it is vital for believers to recognize who they really are. If we think we are slaves of sin, we will likely live that way and not be bothered by what we view as inevitable. If we believe we are free from sin's bondage, then we likely live free and not tolerate slavery to sin.

Remember Rom 12:1-2. From where does transformation of life come? Paul says it comes by the renewing of our minds. It is a mental issue. It comes from God's Word and from abiding in it.

This leads to a related point on how we are to live out our freedom from sin's bondage.

THE CHRISTIAN LIFE IS NOT PRIMARILY A MATTER OF DETERMINATION TO OBEY

I don't recall discussing the issue of the place of the will and of determination in the Christian life with Zane until long after I studied under him. When we were in church together at Victor Street Bible Chapel in Dallas we discussed this issue. At the time, around 1992, I thought that obedience was primarily a matter of practice (i.e., the spiritual disciplines) and desire and determination, like what is needed to finish a marathon.

Zane told me he believed that my view was essentially a legalistic view. If I just determine not to do the evil and determine instead to do the good, then I am trapped in a Romans 7 experience. Focusing on the commands produces enslavement to sin, not freedom from it.

Zane explained that while we need to desire to please God and to obey God, the way in which we do that is not by ratcheting up our determination. It is by realizing who we are in Christ and then allowing God's Word to transform us. Back then he pointed me to verses that he later championed in *Six Secrets of the Christian Life*, Rom 12:1-2 and 2 Cor 3:18.

So while a determination to obey is a fine thing in one sense, we must recognize that in itself it is actually insufficient. We need the Spirit of God to apply the Word of God to our thinking, and to renew our minds, so that the desired transformation will occur.

I found this a radical and thoroughly Biblical teaching then. And I see now that it is rooted in the Lord's teachings in John 8:30-32.

FREE GRACE THEOLOGY IS NOT ANTINOMIAN AND IT DOES TEACH ACCOUNTABILITY

Implicit in the teaching of John 8:31-32 and Romans 6 is that we are called to live in our experience as we are in our position. Believers are free from sin's bondage in our position. Thus we should reckon that it is so and live like who we really are.

Also in the background of John 8:31-32 and Roman 6 is the issue of accountability. How we live matters. We reap what we sow.

APPLICATIONS

A number of applications come to mind:

1. Believers should not only have assurance of everlasting life, but also assurance that we are no longer slaves of sin in our position.
2. Believers should have an ongoing mindset that they are slaves of righteousness and that they are no longer slaves of sin.
3. We should recognize that the Christian life is primarily a battle of the mind.
4. Realize that dedication, as valuable as it is, is an insufficient means of victory in the Christian life. Indeed, dedication without a renewed mind actually produces slavery to sin in one's experience.
5. Do not question your own assurance of everlasting life, or that of anyone else, on the basis of lifestyle and works. Assurance of everlasting life is found simply in believing what the Lord has promised. It has nothing to do with our works or our freedom from sin in our experience.
6. Pray for God to give you a renewed mind and pray that He causes you to abide in God's Word.
7. Go to a church that is clear on the free gift of everlasting life and the costly yet blessed value of abiding in Christ's teachings.

CONCLUSION

The words, "You shall know the truth and the truth shall make you free," are not magical words that refer to any and all kinds of truth and any and all kinds of freedom. They are powerful words that refer specifically to the truth the Lord Jesus and His Apostles taught and to the specific freedom from bondage to sin in one's experience.

Yes, perseverance is a condition for freedom from sin's bondage in our daily lives. It is not a condition of everlasting life. But abiding daily in Jesus' words is required for us to experience victory in our Christian lives.

I grew up in an alcoholic family. For years I had a victim mentality. I thought I was a victim in life. Woe is me. I can't be a nice guy, a good husband, a good employer, or someone who is easy to get along with because I am damaged goods. But later I came to see that such thinking is unbiblical. I am not my past experiences. I have been damaged, yes. But I am a slave of righteousness. God can transform my life and He does as long as I abide in the teachings of God's Word.

I sometimes slip back into a victim mentality, but for the most part I now see myself as a slave of righteousness. I realize that my eternal self is sinless.

While I have trouble at the emotional level viewing my life in a positive sense, I realize that I have changed a lot over the last 40 years as a result of the transforming power of God's Word in my life. While I'm not what I'm going to be, I am far more than I used to be. God has changed me for the better. *Please be patient, God is not finished with me yet*, is of course true. But I know who I am and I am not a slave of sin.

May we praise God for our freedom. We are free to live righteously. We are free to please God. We are free to live in such a way that one day soon the Lord will say to us, "Well done, good servant" (Luke 19:17).