

## 2:1 FREEDOM IN CHRIST

**Jesus said to the woman, ‘Your faith has saved you; go in peace.’**

*Luke 7:50*

**You will know the truth, and the truth will set you free. If the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed.**

*John 8:32, 36*

**Through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit who gives life has set you free from the law of sin and death.**

*Romans 8:2*

We hear a lot about ‘freedom in Christ,’ and that can’t be a bad thing! But exactly how does Jesus set us free? Is it by our faith, or by the word of truth, or by the Holy Spirit? Are there certain infallible steps we can take which will lead us to the freedom we long for and which others tell us they have experienced?

In 2010 thirty-three Chilean miners were trapped deep inside their mine by a rock fall. Their rescue took 69 days and included drilling through five kilometres of rock and raising the men individually to the surface in a specially constructed capsule. Some of the men who were Christians said, ‘We were not 33 down there, we were 34,’ referring to their strong sense that Jesus was with them.

What saved them? Was it the men’s faith (kept alive by services provided by the chaplain), or the voices of those who promised hope from above, or the incredible technical skill of the rescuers? All these, and other factors, clearly played an essential part in the story; yet it was by the grace of God that they all survived.

The woman finding forgiveness and drying Jesus’ feet with her hair; the Son of God who is himself the truth that sets us free; our union with Christ who supplies his lifegiving and liberating Spirit: all these are descriptions of the new law of grace at work. ‘Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift!’ (2 Corinthians 9:15).

*‘Judge not the Lord by feeble sense, but trust him for his grace.’ I may not be able to touch Jesus physically as the woman did, but I can tell him how much I need him at my heart’s core. ‘Jesus, be the centre; be my source, be my light, Jesus. Be the fire in my heart; be the wind in these sails; be the reason that I live, Jesus.’*

## 2:2 SPIRIT AND LAW

**If you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law.**

*Galatians 5:18*

**Though I am not free from God’s law but am under Christ’s law.**

*1 Corinthians 9:21*

A man gave his young son a kite for his birthday. They went up the local hill to fly it in a fresh breeze. At first the boy held it too tightly and it fluttered to the ground. Then he let the string run out and the kite wrenched itself free, flying high on the wind till it crashed into a bush. Then the father took control and held it steady so that it flew high and joyful. ‘Why couldn’t I do that?’ asked the son. ‘You will be able to – with practice’ was the reply.

At first sight Paul seems to be contradicting himself. How can he be simultaneously ‘not under the law’ yet ‘not free from God’s law’? Rather than our finding the answer in the different contexts of the two letters, Scripture may be presenting us with an apparent paradox in order to lead us into a liberating truth.

The kite analogy is useful because it shows how the limitations of the human spirit are designed to enhance our freedom rather than to cripple it. We are created to love God and each other. The gift of the Spirit puts Christ in control of our love life. If we reject his controlling hand, we crash, or else never get off the ground.

‘The law’ is shorthand for external restraints and social or religious conventions. ‘The law made nothing perfect’ (Hebrews 7:19) because it cannot control human nature (Romans 7:18); Jesus’ death changes all that, by destroying the power of the selfish ego and replacing it with his own perfect freedom to do God’s will.

*Why can’t I live like him, then? Maybe it takes practice. My relationship with Christ, my alignment to his gracious control, isn’t the work of a moment, or sorted by reading a set of instructions. It results from the ceaseless interaction of his Spirit with my spirit, as I claim his promises and submit to his wise guidance. ‘I am weak, but you are mighty; hold me with your powerful hand.’*

## 2:3 SLAVISH FEARS

**The Spirit you received does not make you slaves, so that you live in fear again.**

*Romans 8:15*

**Formerly, when you did not know God, you were slaves to those who by nature were not gods. But now that you know God – or rather are known by God – how is it that you are turning back to those weak and miserable forces? Do you wish to be enslaved by them all over again?**

*Galatians 4:8-9*

Louise used to join in everything the gang got up to. Some of it was stupid or even cruel, but she grew used to that. Then another gang member's mum bumped into her and poured out her distress and anger, how her daughter had become a different person, surly, slovenly and utterly selfish. Lou began to see her lifestyle for what it was. Leaving the gang wasn't easy, but she persevered and walked free – until a former boyfriend bullied her into coming back. The old slavish mentality returned, this time for keeps.

The human spirit was born to be free, under God's good and wise direction. Once we cut loose from him, we may think we have gained independence and are truly liberated, but in reality we have become prone to other forms of bondage. Paul describes these as 'gods that are not gods', so what might they be? Examples abound.

Physical addiction to alcohol or narcotics; mental addiction to pornography; emotional entanglement; superstition, ritual taboos, occult practices; career ambition; narcissism or sheer personal vanity. Paul's own Pharisaism was a powerful driving force before he met Christ. Gang membership is only one way for those who have thrown off the shackles of home or traditional faith to find social identity – cults, inner circles, dining clubs, sports teams, all have their ways of straitjacketing the soul. They may be 'weak and miserable', even innocent and respectable, but they cow us into submission. The ultimate bully is the fear of death (Hebrews 2:15).

*Jesus asks us, 'Why are you so afraid?' (Mark 4:40). Only the Son can set us free from lesser 'gods' (John 8:36). What are mine? Have I brought them to the cross, where Christ has disarmed and triumphed over them (Colossians 2:15)?*

## 2:4 PRAYER ACCESS

**Our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand.**

*Romans 5:2*

**What we have received is not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, so that we may understand what God has freely given us.**

*1 Corinthians 2:12*

To gain access to the viewing balcony at the very top of the Cathedral (or 'Duomo') in Florence, you need to climb the 463 steep, narrow steps that wind upwards through the double shell of the cupola. There is no elevator, it is claustrophobic and you need a head for heights as you emerge above the city's streets. There is a fee for the whole visit, of course, and you have to book a time slot.

By contrast, the access Jesus has won for us through the cross into the very throne-room and presence of God is free, instantaneous and available at any time. Our sense of unworthiness and spiritual incapacity is countered by the upward lift of the Spirit, whose special work is to energise our prayers from within (Romans 8:26).

The 'spirit of the world' says there is no such thing as a free lunch. If you want to find God you have to pay for it and toil for it, and even then you can't be sure of ever reaching him. Why do we prefer to believe the world's version, when the word of God tells us straight out that 'in Christ and through faith in him we may approach God with freedom and confidence' (Ephesians 3:12)?

Brunelleschi's staircase was made for the workforce to use in their daily labour. It is still operational 600 years later, its steps worn smooth by the passage of countless feet. Through our prayers, intercessions and ceaseless 'God-bothering' we are building a kingdom that will last for ever. Are we part of Christ's workforce?

*Lord, forgive my feeble excuses of unfitness or claustrophobia. Thank you for the encouragement to seek your throne of grace. Help me by your Spirit to understand what God longs to give me and those I pray for. Keep me climbing those steps!*

## 2:5 THE DEPTHS OF DIVINE LOVE

**I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the Lord's holy people, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge.**

*Ephesians 3:17-19*

**The Spirit searches all things, even the deep things of God.**

*1 Corinthians 2:10b*

Not only have human beings ascended to the highest point above sea-level (the summit of Everest) but they have been to the lowest point of the ocean (the Mariana Trench in the Pacific) – and what did they find there? Plastic litter. Such an anticlimax.

What do we find when we probe the depths of God? Love, and nothing but love. Paul is saying two apparently contradictory things, that we can know this love and that we can't, but it is in order to make a key point. We can't ever plumb the real depths of God's love; and yet we can, because we see it in the cross of Christ.

He draws, if you like, a four-dimensional picture of the cross: its height (meeting the full holiness of God), its depth (descending to the worst of human sin), its breadth (embracing all mankind) and its length (travelling on through time and into eternity). The cross is the guarantee of God's love, and its permanent expression. 'The Lamb at the centre of the throne will be their shepherd' (Revelation 7:17).

How can we understand the cross? Well, says Paul, there will always be more to discover – and yet, through associating with the Lord's believing people, and through the work of the Holy Spirit, God can reveal his love to us in our earthly lives. And it won't be an anticlimax when we finally meet him face to face (1 Corinthians 13:12).

*Dear Lord Jesus, there is so much about the cross in the Bible, yet I seem to grasp so little of it in my mind and my heart. Please may your Spirit shine your light into my darkness, clear away the rubbish, and reveal the true extent of your love for me.*

## 2:6 MAKING GOD KNOWN

**I have made you known to them, and will continue to make you known in order that the love you have for me may be in them and that I myself may be in them.** *John 17:26*

**You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.** *Acts 1:8*

In one of Aesop's fables the North Wind and the Sun dispute which of them is the stronger. Soon a traveller comes along wrapped in a warm cloak, so they compete to get him to remove it. The North Wind blows as hard as it can, but the man pulls the garment all the more closely round him. The Sun begins to shine in its warmth, and in due course off comes his cloak.

Jesus taught and modelled the love of God. He had known that love from eternity, and now he wants us to know it too. So as he faces the prospect of the cross, he asks his Father that those who will believe in him should be carriers of God's love. This is going to happen as he himself indwells them by the Holy Spirit. His last words before his ascension are very similar.

It won't do to turn those last words into a eleventh commandment: 'You shall witness to everyone you possibly can.' A church youth club member spoke to me hesitantly one Sunday about Christian things; when I asked whether her faith made her happy, she admitted they'd been told to witness to at least one person each day, and she was doing her task for last Tuesday.

The language of love isn't a set form of words or a crippling imperative. It is the infinitely varied expression of a deep inner contentment. If I am to tell others about God's love for them, they will see straight through me if I don't really know it for myself.

*'Perfect love drives out fear' (1 John 4:18). Forgive me, Lord, if I've got this witnessing thing wrong. I long to be able to tell others what you are really like. Your nature and your name is love. Please help me despite myself, because it's what you've told us you want.*