

Living Free
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Pastor Craig Watson

Kalamazoo Free Methodist Church

Freedom – everyone wants it. Everyone strives for it. Everyone talks about it. Everyone seems willing to fight for it. Today, the day after Independence Day, we even celebrate it. But, what is it really? What does freedom mean?

In the dictionary, “freedom” is defined as “independence; license to do as one wants” (www.thesaurus.reference.com). It’s synonyms include such words and phrases as liberty, abandon, unrestraint, latitude, carte blanche, leeway and even indulgence (*ibid.*). Such definitions remind me of the opening lines of the Rascals song from the ‘60s –

*All the world over, so easy to see
People everywhere just wanna be free.
Listen, please listen, that’s the way it should be
Peace in the valley, people got to be free.*

Everyone wants it. Everyone strives for it. Everyone talks about it. But, does everyone really understand it? We want freedom. Freedom *from* what? Freedom *to* what? Is it freedom from some kind of bondage that we sense we are in? Is it freedom to do whatever we want whenever we want? How do we get such freedom? What happens *when* we get free?

Many men and women have spoken eloquently over the years on the subject of freedom. The great physicist Albert Einstein once said, “All religions, arts and sciences are branches of the same tree. All these aspirations are directed toward ennobling man's life, lifting it from the sphere of mere physical existence and leading the individual towards freedom.” Now, I don’t agree with his premise that “all religions, arts and sciences are branches of the same tree,” but I do believe that people think that each of these can lead them to greater freedom. Unfortunately, the opposite has often been the case. In pursuit of various religions, arts, sciences and even the

very pursuit of freedom, what people have found is not “liberty,” but “slavery” – a bondage of their hearts, their wills, and their minds. This is not new. It has gone on for thousands of years. In fact, we can find that **the “search for freedom” recorded in the Bible is essentially no different from the search for freedom many find themselves in today.** Let’s look together at one example of this “search” and where it leads to as recorded in the book of Jeremiah, chapter 2, beginning at the first verse.

¹ The word of the LORD came to me: ² "Go and proclaim in the hearing of Jerusalem:

" I remember the devotion of your youth,
how as a bride you loved me
and followed me through the desert,
through a land not sown.

³ Israel was holy to the LORD,
the first fruits of his harvest;
all who devoured her were held guilty,
and disaster overtook them,' "
declares the LORD.

In relationship with God (Jeremiah 2:1-3)

The prophet Jeremiah has been sent by God to speak to His people. He begins by reminding them of where they had begun. They once had a great relationship with God. In fact, he describes their relationship as being like a young bride with her groom. The Israelites children of Israel were once fully devoted to God and followed Him completely. God jealously cared for them and watched over them. **Their relationship was based on love and trust.** But then something happened.

Wandering away from God (Jeremiah 2:4-8)

In verse 4 of Jeremiah 2, the prophet declared,

⁴ Hear the word of the LORD, O house of Jacob,
all you clans of the house of Israel.

⁵ This is what the LORD says:
"What fault did your fathers find in me,

that they strayed so far from me?
 They followed worthless idols
 and became worthless themselves.

⁶ They did not ask, 'Where is the LORD,
 who brought us up out of Egypt
 and led us through the barren wilderness,
 through a land of deserts and rifts,
 a land of drought and darkness,
 a land where no one travels and no one lives?'

⁷ I brought you into a fertile land
 to eat its fruit and rich produce.
 But you came and defiled my land
 and made my inheritance detestable.

⁸ The priests did not ask,
 'Where is the LORD ?'
 Those who deal with the law did not know me;
 the leaders rebelled against me.
 The prophets prophesied by Baal,
 following worthless idols.

Somewhere along the line, **the Israelites decided that their relationship with God wasn't enough.** As Jeremiah put it, they “found fault” with God and began to wander off (vs. 5). They decided to declare their independence from God and go in search of something better. They began to put other things in place of God in their lives – “worthless idols” Jeremiah calls them – and the farther they wandered the farther their thoughts turned from God. They no longer wondered where God – this God who had cared for them enough to deliver them from the Egyptians and lead them through the desert to the promised land – they no longer wondered where He was. In fact, the priests went about their “duties” without giving the Lord a second thought. All of the leaders rebelled against the one true God and began to follow worthless idols.

Now, we could pause here and draw the parallel to our day and how many of our leaders have also turned from God and begun to lead us farther away from the Truth, but instead let's consider the parallels to our own lives. Perhaps you can personally relate to the path that the Israelites took. Maybe you, too, once fully believed in God but, somewhere along the way, you

took your eyes off of Him and began to look to other “things” to fill your life. Oh, you may not have consciously found fault with God, but subconsciously you felt there must be more and so, you began to wander off. Maybe your friends had found something that you thought you wanted. Maybe some of the things you began to see and hear about were too attractive to just ignore. And so, like the Israelites, you wandered away from God and “His ways” and began to try something new.

The results of wandering away from God (Jeremiah 2:9-12)

The problem you have found – as did the Israelites – is that the results of wandering away from God were not all that great! Listen to what Jeremiah said to Israelites in verses 9 to 12.

- ⁹ "Therefore I bring charges against you again,"
declares the LORD.
"And I will bring charges against your children's children."
¹⁰ Cross over to the coasts of Kittim and look,
send to Kedar and observe closely;
see if there has ever been anything like this:
¹¹ Has a nation ever changed its gods?
(Yet they are not gods at all.)
But my people have exchanged their Glory
for worthless idols.
¹² Be appalled at this, O heavens,
and shudder with great horror,"
declares the LORD.

The Israelites wandered away from God and ended up chasing after idols. In some way, they felt God’s ways were too inhibitive. They wanted to be free from God’s restrictions. But, did you catch what Jeremiah said? Look again at verse 11: *Has a nation ever changed its gods? (Yet they are not gods at all.) But my people have exchanged their Glory for worthless idols.* Other nations did not change their gods. Why? Could it be that there was greater bondage in following these idols than the Israelites experienced when they followed God? God gave the Israelites the freedom to choose who they would follow and serve. When they began

following after other gods – the idols of other nations – they found themselves in greater bondage than before.

What about us? When we turn away from God and begin to look for fulfillment in other things, do we really find freedom? If you have ever looked for greater fulfillment by pursuing power at work, pouring yourself into climbing the “ladder of success,” have you found the deep and lasting satisfaction that you thought you would find; or, did you only find a greater demand of your time and energies? If you ever sought greater “freedom” and satisfaction through the use of drugs or alcohol, did you find lasting satisfaction; or, did you only find temporary relief, but lasting problems that seemed to grow over time? What other choices come to mind that, while they led away from God, they led you into greater bondage in other areas of your life?

Listen: There are **two sins that lead to bondage: Declaring independence *from* God and proclaiming self-sufficiency.** Look again at Jeremiah’s words as he continues in verse 13:

¹³ "My people have committed two sins:
They have forsaken me,
the spring of living water,
and have dug their own cisterns,
broken cisterns that cannot hold water.

¹⁴ Is Israel a servant, a slave by birth?
Why then has he become plunder?

¹⁵ Lions have roared;
they have growled at him.
They have laid waste his land;
his towns are burned and deserted.

¹⁶ Also, the men of Memphis and Tahpanhes
have shaved the crown of your head.

When we declare, “*I don’t need God; I can take care of myself,*” then we are declaring our independence from God and proclaiming our self-sufficiency. However, when we go this route, we will eventually find that neither statement is true. We *do* need God and we *can’t* take care of all the needs of our lives.

Jeremiah gives us an example that it is like we dig our own cisterns (instead of letting God dig it for us) and when we are finished, we find that it will not hold water. What good is it, then? Yet, this is precisely what so many people have done. They have gone about building their own lives – digging their own cisterns – and filling it with all the things that they think they need and want in their lives. But, nothing lasts. Like the water put into a broken cistern, the various things we pour into our lives fade away. Unfortunately, some of the *effects* of the things we pour into our lives *don't* go away. We are left with broken relationships, addictions, debt, guilt, shame, hurt, and the list goes on and on. All because we insisted on doing things *our* way, free from the perceived bondage we saw in following God!

The sad thing is that **when we wander into bondage, we have no one to blame but ourselves!** This is precisely what Jeremiah tells the Israelites in verses 17-19

- ¹⁷ Have you not brought this on yourselves
by forsaking the LORD your God
when he led you in the way?
¹⁸ Now why go to Egypt
to drink water from the Shihor?
And why go to Assyria
to drink water from the River?
¹⁹ Your wickedness will punish you;
your backsliding will rebuke you.
Consider then and realize
how evil and bitter it is for you
when you forsake the LORD your God
and have no awe of me,"
declares the Lord, the LORD Almighty.

Jeremiah explains that it is *not* God who punishes us when we wander away from Him. It is the *consequences* of our actions. Jeremiah declares in verse 19, “*Your* wickedness will punish you; *your* backsliding will rebuke you.” You’ve heard the saying, “You reap what you sow?” Well, that is exactly what he is saying here. When we choose to wander away from God and do things *our* way instead of His, then we face the consequences of our actions.

Why can't we seem to see that when we begin to experience the bad side of our choices?

Sadly, **in our bondage, we fall deeper into sin and deception.** Jeremiah points out how this is true for the Israelites beginning in verse 20.

- ²⁰ "Long ago you broke off your yoke
and tore off your bonds;
you said, 'I will not serve you!'
Indeed, on every high hill
and under every spreading tree
you lay down as a prostitute.
- ²¹ I had planted you like a choice vine
of sound and reliable stock.
How then did you turn against me
into a corrupt, wild vine?
- ²² Although you wash yourself with soda
and use an abundance of soap,
the stain of your guilt is still before me,"
declares the Sovereign LORD.
- ²³ "How can you say, 'I am not defiled;
I have not run after the Baals'?
See how you behaved in the valley;
consider what you have done.
You are a swift she-camel
running here and there,
- ²⁴ a wild donkey accustomed to the desert,
sniffing the wind in her craving—
in her heat who can restrain her?
Any males that pursue her need not tire themselves;
at mating time they will find her.

In Jeremiah's graphic analogy, what really jumps out is how deceived the Israelites have become. Look again at verse 23 where Jeremiah asks them, "How can you say, 'I am not defiled; I have not run after the Baals'?" See how you behaved in the valley; consider what you have done." The Israelites thought that they were alright since they had not *specifically* "run after" the false gods. In other words, if they weren't worshipping in the temples of the false gods and they weren't burning sacrifices to them, then they were still "good Israelites!" Yet, they were involved in so many other immoral, sinful things that were contrary to what God had told

them to do and they had all but given up on worshipping God, that Jeremiah was saying that they were blind to how far they had wandered from God.

It is like a “social Christian” today who doesn’t have a personal relationship with the Lord, yet, because they are an American and occasionally attend church and pray, they think they are alright. They consider themselves to be a “Christian”. If you ask them, they will say that they are basically a good person, and therefore, they think they’re alright with God. But, in varying degrees, they are separated from God due to the choices they are making in their lives – choosing their independence from Him and relying on their own form of “goodness.” Unfortunately, they don’t see this and continue moving further and further from God.

Eventually, we all experience a crisis in our lives that seems too big for us to handle. Our “independence” and “self-reliance” now seem foolish and we make a desperate cry to God.

Now, our **bondage turns to desperation**. Listen to what Jeremiah says beginning in verse 25.

- ²⁵ Do not run until your feet are bare
and your throat is dry.
But you said, 'It's no use!
I love foreign gods,
and I must go after them.'
- ²⁶ "As a thief is disgraced when he is caught,
so the house of Israel is disgraced—
they, their kings and their officials,
their priests and their prophets.
- ²⁷ They say to wood, 'You are my father,'
and to stone, 'You gave me birth.'
They have turned their backs to me
and not their faces;
yet when they are in trouble, they say,
'Come and save us!'
- ²⁸ Where then are the gods you made for yourselves?
Let them come if they can save you
when you are in trouble!
For you have as many gods
as you have towns, O Judah.

Jeremiah tells the Israelites that when desperate times arrive, they first try to rely on the idols they had abandoned God for. But, when these idols prove worthless, then the Israelites desperately cry out to God and say, “Come and save us!” (vs. 27). Jeremiah asks them in verse 28, “Where then are the gods you made for yourselves? Let them come if they can save you when you are in trouble!” But, of course, they cannot.

Listen. There are certain things I can promise you in life. One is that you *will* face a crisis at some point that is bigger than you. When that time comes, you will feel desperate. In your desperation, where will you turn? If you have wandered from God, will you turn to the people and things with which you have replaced Him? When they fail to meet your needs, will you turn in desperation to God, even though you are not willing to fully trust Him and follow Him? Why should He be obligated to help you if you have chosen to abandon Him? In that case, what happens when He *doesn't* make things turn out as we want?

Often what happens is that, **in our desperation, we blame God.** That is what the Israelites did. Look at verses 29-30.

²⁹ "Why do you bring charges against me?
You have all rebelled against me,"
declares the LORD.

³⁰ "In vain I punished your people;
they did not respond to correction.
Your sword has devoured your prophets
like a ravaging lion.

The Israelites brought charges against God. In other words, they blamed God for their problems. He had tried to correct them and to lead them back to Him, but the Israelites would not listen. They wanted things done their way on their terms and when God didn't “come through,” then they pointed their fingers at Him and blamed Him for the problems they had created.

Unfortunately, we tend to do the same. We say things like, “If God were real, then He wouldn’t have let *that* happen.” The *that* we are referring to is usually the result of someone’s sin, a choice that someone has made that was *not* what God wanted. Remember, *we* wanted the freedom to choose our destiny. So, when God gives us our freedom and we – or others in our world – choose to use this freedom wrongly, why are we wagging our finger at God and accusing Him of doing wrong?

The truth is that **as long as we hold on to our “independence,” we will be outside of the care of God and living lives of deception, desperation and disappointment.** This is *not* what God wants for us, but it is what so many have chosen. We can relate to what Jeremiah writes in verses 31-37.

- ³¹ "You of this generation, consider the word of the LORD :
"Have I been a desert to Israel
or a land of great darkness?
Why do my people say, 'We are free to roam;
we will come to you no more'?"
- ³² Does a maiden forget her jewelry,
a bride her wedding ornaments?
Yet my people have forgotten me,
days without number.
- ³³ How skilled you are at pursuing love!
Even the worst of women can learn from your ways.
- ³⁴ On your clothes men find
the lifeblood of the innocent poor,
though you did not catch them breaking in.
Yet in spite of all this
- ³⁵ you say, 'I am innocent;
he is not angry with me.'
But I will pass judgment on you
because you say, 'I have not sinned.'
- ³⁶ Why do you go about so much,
changing your ways?
You will be disappointed by Egypt
as you were by Assyria.
- ³⁷ You will also leave that place
with your hands on your head,

for the LORD has rejected those you trust;
you will not be helped by them.

As long as we choose to live apart from God, our lives will continue to less than we want. There will be more deception, more desperation, and more disappointment. Is that what you want? You can choose to stiffen your back and say, “What has God ever done for me;” or, you can choose to come back to the one Who has never moved and Who has continued to reach out to you. How do we find our way back to God?

Finding our way back to God

First of all, listen to **the invitation** found in Matthew 11:28-29.

²⁸“Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. ²⁹Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. (Matthew 11:28-29)

Jesus invites you to stop trying to do things your way and to give your life over to Him. Let Him lead you and teach you a better way to live. In verse 29, He says to take His yoke upon you and learn from him. We often picture a yoke like we have seen on a pair of oxen who are pulling a wagon. But, during the time when Jesus said this, the Jewish rabbis’ teaching – the entirety of what they would teach their disciples – was referred to as the rabbi’s “yoke.” So, when **Jesus was saying, “Take my yoke upon you and learn from me,” he was inviting us to become His disciples and to begin learning everything that He had to teach us.**

To do this, we have to make a decision to become His disciple and to follow Him. That means turning our lives over to Him completely and agreeing to obey Him. That is what making Him “Lord” of our lives means. **It is not enough to simply believe that Jesus died for your sins. You need to also accept Him as Lord – the supreme leader – of your life. That requires a decision on your part.**

I know some of you think that you have gone too far; that you have wandered too far from God for Him to ever receive you back, but this is not true! You have probably heard of the story of the Prodigal Son who asked for his inheritance from his father and promptly ran off and squandered it all. It is a story to describe how we wander from God and how God never gives up on us. Take a look with me at **the wake-up call and the welcome** that is found in this story recorded in Luke 15:17-24.

¹⁷"When he (*the prodigal son*) came to his senses, he said, 'How many of my father's hired men have food to spare, and here I am starving to death! ¹⁸I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. ¹⁹I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired men.' ²⁰So he got up and went to his father.

"But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him.

²¹"The son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.'

²²"But the father said to his servants, 'Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. ²³Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let's have a feast and celebrate. ²⁴For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.' So they began to celebrate.
(Luke 15:17-24)

This, my friends, is how our Heavenly Father will respond when we finally make the decision to accept Jesus as our Savior and Lord. He has been waiting and watching for us. **He is not interested in making us his “hired hands” and to somehow put us in bondage. Rather, He wants to welcome us home as His sons and daughters;** to bless us with His favor; to fill us with His love and joy as well as to forgive us and cleanse us of our past sins.

So, what will be **our response**. If you find that you are the prodigal – that you have wandered away from God but would like to come home today – you can come home and find your Heavenly Father waiting. All you need to do is **ask Jesus into your life and to commit your life to following Him as your Lord.**

Living Free

What Jesus offers us is real life – a life apart from the deception, desperation and disappointments we knew when we tried to live without Him. This is how He put it in John 8:35-36.

³⁵Now a slave has no permanent place in the family, but a son belongs to it forever. ³⁶So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed. (John 8:35-36)

Today, if you commit your life to Jesus as Lord, you can begin living free!