

# Double Freedom

We are looking at some of the basic facts of what it means for us to be 'in Christ', so that we can learn to live in him and experience the grace of God in a more and more real way. I am convinced that God's plan is to radically change people **from the inside**, and that the main way he does that is by revealing truth to us and so enabling us to trust that truth. **Ephesians 2:8-9** says "For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith - and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God - not by works, so that no one can boast" and **Romans 10:17** says "faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word about Christ." Too often, we do not experience the grace of God enough because we simply do not know what he has **already** done for us in Jesus. That was certainly true for me.

Whatever our background, many (most?) of us will probably not have really heard much about some of these basic facts. As we look into them together, I pray with Paul that, for all of us, "the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and revelation, so that you may know him better. I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in his holy people, and his incomparably great power for us who believe." (**Ephesians 1:17-19**) This is one of the important ways in which the Holy Spirit works:- "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**)

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One of the verses that made an impact on me as a student, when the Lord started to change my life, was **Luke 9:23** "Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will save it." And, as Jim Elliott wrote in response to that, "He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose."

But what does it mean to 'take up our cross daily'? Is it a matter of self-sacrifice, or of bearing with a great difficulty or burden? In everyday talk, many people will say someone has a 'cross to bear' if they are suffering prolonged pain or distress, but **is that what Jesus meant?**

Clearly, he was speaking to those who thought they wanted to follow him, and making it clear that it would not be easy! But it was more than just hardship that he promised them, it was daily death! As an American preacher has said, it is as if Jesus had said 'take up your electric chair and follow me' - the cross was simply a place of death, with none of the religious overtones which have been added in the last 2000 years.

The challenge of being prepared to lose your life for the sake of a cause can be seen through history and to the present day. Paul wrote "I face death (*literally: "I die"*) every day - yes, just as surely as I boast about you in Christ Jesus our Lord." (**1 Corinthians 15:31**). In this passage, and over in **2 Corinthians 11 & 12**, he writes about some of the suffering which he has undergone for the sake of the gospel, but he also makes it

clear that 'dying daily' is more than facing danger, however great and frequent that danger may be, and that it is not just for 'heroes of the faith', but for **every believer!**

Back in **Romans 6:1-7**, Paul has just come through chapters 1 to 5, explaining about failure (= sin), God's law, righteousness, faith and the grace of God in forgiveness and then asks the famous question: 'If God's grace is so great that the more failure there is, the more forgiveness he extends, then why not just go on deliberately failing so that God can give more grace?' His answer is surprising: 'No way! You're dead to all that - or don't you know that your old life died with Jesus on the cross and that, when you were baptised, you were declaring that by your actions?'

Like the believers in Rome, we may be unaware of this vital part of the grace of God to us in the Lord Jesus. Perhaps we have heard and read this passage (and others) and taken them to mean that we **OUGHT** to be dead to sin, but that is not what Paul is saying. Very clearly, he is saying that every one who belongs to the Lord Jesus Christ **has been** put to death on the cross with him, that our old life is well and truly dead.

This is the old life that always wants its own way, that has no regard for others and positively enjoys disobeying God (along with a long list of other undesirable characteristics!) We may think that it is still alive and well in us, in spite of the fact that we have put our trust in Jesus, but God says that it is dead!

Do you remember when you first came to Jesus for forgiveness? You didn't feel very forgiven, but there was an offer in front of you, that Jesus had paid the penalty for your abysmal failure and that you could experience forgiveness by taking hold of the offer. You had received the 'envelope' with the gift inside - now you needed to open it and take the gift itself. Hopefully you did just that - and the experience of genuine forgiveness followed.

Here is the same process again. You would really like to be rid of the old life, to escape the slavery to sin that seems to hold you. The gift that Father has already given to you and me is that we **have died** to that old life, simply because we have been joined to Jesus. Do you remember the illustration of the piece of paper placed in a book? Whatever happens to the book happens to the piece of paper. Our Father has placed us in Jesus (**1 Corinthians 1:30** again!) Jesus has died - we have died with him. It's simple cause and effect, almost like  $2 + 2 = 4$ .

And that's exactly what Paul goes on to say in **Romans 6:11**. 'Because you know this is true', he writes, 'count on it!' There is no point in trying to count on something you don't know is true. If you are doing your accounts and a column of figures adds up to £99, no amount of 'counting on it' to be £100 will make any difference - it will still be £99. Sometimes Christians have tried to tell themselves that they are dead to sin, while all the time they are not convinced - they don't actually believe it. We need to receive what the Lord is telling us here. Maybe it will take a little time for us to be convinced; no problem. Try checking some more passages with the same message:- **2 Corinthians 5:14-17, Galatians 2:20, 5:24, Colossians 3:3** - and ask the Lord to show you what is true. That's a request he loves to answer!

Discovering that we are dead to sin and dead to the slavery of failure simply by the fact that we are joined to Jesus is a massive release! As someone said to me, it is not that we are now unable to sin, but that we **are** now able not to sin. We now have a way of

escape in the face of temptation - we can hide in the fact that we are dead to sin. (**1 Corinthians 10:13**) It was one of the things that dawned on me when I began to see that I was **in Christ!** At last, I didn't need to try to be dead to sin - God had already done it for me. All I needed to do was take hold of what he had already given me - if you like, to go on 'opening the envelope' and making use of the gift. I was beginning to learn to 'abide in Christ'.

But, once again, there was more! Paul writes in **1 Corinthians 15:56** that "the power of sin is the law". Even when we have discovered that we have been set free from slavery to sin, there is often a subtle 'leverage' on us to try to please God. What could be more natural? After all, he has given us so much that the very least we can do is to try to please him in every way possible.

In the past when I had failed and failed again, I used to come to the Lord for forgiveness and make all sorts of promises about how it would all be different now and that I would really live a life pleasing to him. I suspect that we have all been there - and in the next place, where we have not lived up to our promises and have failed again! Not necessarily that we have fallen directly into disobedience, but just that we have not been able to live a life that pleases our Father. Devastatingly disheartening, especially as we really want our lives to reflect his glory. We may have found the way to forgiveness for our wrongdoing, even found freedom from slavery to doing wrong, but can we actually live a life that positively pleases him? It seems impossible.

Once again, the solution lies in the death - and resurrection - of the Lord Jesus Christ. (Did we realise that there was such a treasury of grace?) Very simply, Paul writes that we have died to the law through the body of Christ (**Romans 7:4**). In other words, by being **in Christ** - joined to him by what the Father has done - we have died to all the rules that we make for ourselves or that others try to put on us, ways in which we try to please God - even trying to obey God's own commandments as a way of pleasing him!

**Romans 7** may not be an easy chapter to understand at first (or even later) reading. In places, Paul seems to say that his old life is very much alive and giving him a lot of trouble as he seeks to serve the Lord, in spite of the fact that all the way through **Romans 6** he has been very clear about that fact that anyone who is in Christ is already dead to sin and failure, released from slavery. What's his problem? Is he saying that all he has been sharing about knowing that we are dead to sin, and counting on it, doesn't work?

The problem that Paul describes in **Romans 7** is common experience for many Christians, though it does not seem like a very 'Christian' experience. He is trying to obey all God's commandments, desperate to please God in every way, but finds that whenever a commandment turns up, failure is right there. "Once I was alive apart from the law; but when the commandment came, sin sprang to life and I died. I found that the very commandment that was intended to bring life actually brought death." (**Romans 7:9-10**) Failure like this, especially when it goes on happening, has a crippling effect on us - **condemnation!** A feeling that we are total failures, a disappointment to our heavenly Father, no good as Christians and certainly not worthy to serve the Lord. I have been there, too.

It may help us to realise that the Greek word (*hamartia*) translated as 'sin' throughout the New Testament means literally 'missing the target', not hitting the bullseye. If we didn't already have the word 'sin' in our dictionaries, we could easily translate it as

'failure'. In passing, it is wonderful to realise that the Lord Jesus has paid the price for the forgiveness of all our failures, not just the really bad ones that we might label as 'sin', **and** has set us free from slavery to failure, too !

The frustration that Paul experienced was very real. He felt that his body simply would not do what his mind wanted to do: "What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body that is subject to death?" But then he supplies the answer to his own desperate plea: "Thanks be to God, who delivers me through Jesus Christ our Lord!" (**Romans 7:24-25**)

In **Colossians 2:13-14**, he graphically underlines the same truth: "He forgave us all our sins, having cancelled the charge of our legal indebtedness, which stood against us and condemned us; he has taken it away, nailing it to the cross." The whole passage, **Colossians 2:8-23**, warns of the danger of being trapped into following rules and regulations, and once again shows that it is our being joined to Jesus that gives us release and fullness.

It may sound dangerous to say that we have been set free from any obligation to please God. What will be the result - lawlessness? Don't forget, we are talking about those who are **in Christ** being set free from sin and set free from law. That is the 'negative' side, dealing with the problem of slavery to sin and law, and the fact that we are included in the death of Jesus deals with that side. But God also has a positive solution which follows on directly from death - **resurrection!**

"Therefore, **there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus**, because through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit who gives life has set you free from the law of sin and death." (**Romans 8:1-2**). More on that another time!

Back to where we started: How can I 'take up my cross daily' and follow Jesus? Someone who is carrying a cross is going to his own execution. Can I do that? **Daily?** Honestly, even with all the idealism of youth back in 1969, I had to admit that it was beyond me, much as I might aspire to it. But - wait a minute - if I am included in the death of Jesus, then my old life is already dead and the law's hold on me is already broken. Not by what I can do, but on the basis of what he has already done. I can't do it myself, but I **can** take hold of what he has already done for me, learning to make my home (= 'abide') in him.

The frustration of a fruitless life, condemnation from failure? Consigned to history! "Remain in me, as I also remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me. "I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing. If you do not remain in me, you are like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned. If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. This is to my Father's glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples." (**John 15:4-8**)

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