

CHAPTER 15

FREEDOM: SUSCEPTIBLE TO SIN'S BONDAGE

At a doctor's appointment, the dermatologist asked, "Do you regularly use sunscreen?" I responded, "No." He said, "You should consider it." He continued to let me know what he thought as he treated the pre-cancerous spots on my face: "The sun has a cumulative effect on skin. The more sun, the more likely cancer will develop." With that, he got my attention since back in the day I had been a lifeguard for a number of years. He continued, "It is imperative that you always [stressing *always*] use sunscreen since the amount of sun tolerated varies with each individual."

Likewise, sinful behavior is generally and directly related to the amount of time you put yourself in harm's way.¹ While the length of time may vary with each individual Christian, eventually the likelihood to sin becomes greater. Then it's too late and fellowship with Christ begins to erode.

The Great Deception

Remember what we discussed earlier concerning Adam and Eve in Genesis 3, when Satan made his appearance as a serpent and spoke with Eve. In John 8:44 Jesus tells us that Satan "is a liar," which was evident

ESCAPE

in the distortion of God's words to Adam and Eve. The Tempter said, "Indeed, has God said, 'You shall not eat from any tree of the garden'?" (v 1). Planting distrust of God's character and care for her, he points out that God was holding something back from them. She responded, "From the fruit of the trees of the garden we may eat; but from the fruit of the tree which is in the middle of the garden, God has said, 'You shall not eat from it or touch it, lest you die'" (vv 2-3). You can almost see her pondering, "Why would God set limits? What exactly is He holding back?" Then the serpent presses on with a lie concerning God's Word. Undermining her confidence in God's trustworthiness, he continued, "You surely shall not die! For God knows that in the day you eat from it your eyes will be like God, knowing good and evil" (vv 4-5). The text tells us, she "saw that the tree was good for food" and "the tree was desirable to make *one* wise" (v 6). It was decision time. To obey or not. She wanted wisdom, to know good and evil, so she took and ate along with Adam. You know the rest. "The eyes of both of them were opened" (v 7). They came face to face with sin—what they had done. And they immediately covered themselves out of a sense of guilt.

Doesn't this sound just like a television commercial, reminding you that you are missing out on something. "You don't have 'It,' but you should have it!" "Just take it, and with it, you can be all you should be!" The commercial's message is that *restrictions are wrong, unfair, and limiting*. "You need it! You deserve it and no one should keep it from you." The commercial hints that *personal fulfillment and satisfaction are within reach*. With "It," you will arrive, achieve, or possess all that you so readily deserve. The only thing left—the commercial whispers—decide, decide, decide NOW!

Just like TV ads, Satan was filling Eve's mind with doubts and discontent. "It" in Eve's case was to serve him rather than God. Unfortunately, she made a colossally bad choice, not realizing that a loving God does give His people boundaries for their benefit. Love wants the best for others. Sin disguised in attractive packages fills the world's system and can readily trap those unsure of God's character. We are constantly being bombarded with endless eye-catching attractions that often force us to choose between the world or God. In what or whom we seek satisfaction is the heart of the issue.

FREEDOM: SUSCEPTIBLE TO SIN'S BONDAGE

Process of Sin

Before we cover the process of sin from James 1:13-15, an overview of James 1-2 will give us perspective.

Context of James 1-2

In his letter concerning working out the Christian life, James explains how sin develops (Jam 1:13-15). To grasp the import of this teaching, we should think about the context in the first two chapters of his book. Chapters 1 and 2 are a unit, beginning in 1:2-4 with “trials,” “faith,” and “perfect” (maturity). Then ending in 2:21-23 with a “trial,”² “faith,” and “perfected” (maturity). Additionally, note that the entirety of James 1 and 2 was written to believers (“my brethren” in 1:2, 16; 2:1).

1:2-4

In 1:2-4 he taught that the right responses of a believer to various trials over time demonstrate the steadfastness of his faith, leading to maturity in Christ. The illustration of Abraham concludes the whole section as an example of a believer who had responded correctly to many and various trials in the thirty-plus years from the time he initially believed (2:21-23). As a result of his walk of faith, he was called a “friend of God.” James argues that believers, who have already placed faith in Christ, are to live by faith in relation to life’s problems. Maturity is the result of the “testing/proving” of faith through trials (1:3-4). Not only do the first verses of James 1 and the latter verses of James 2 teach that principle, but also everything in between.

1:5-12

James continued with a discussion that “faith” in the Christian life should remain steadfast but could falter (1:5-8). Remember even Abraham and Sarah’s faith vacillated when they made their own plan for an heir that was different from God’s (Gen 16:1-2) and then lied to King Abimelech saying that Sarah was not his wife (Gen 20:2). After describing the believer’s position with God (Jam 1:9-11), James

ESCAPE

explained that a believer should be “happy” or “content” when he persevered in a “trial” (v 12). Why? He would be approved by God as a result of his faithfulness. The context doesn’t refer to initial faith in Christ, but rather to the subsequent day-to-day faith. This is the same idea as “proving/testing your faith” in verse 3. In fact, “approved” (v 12) and “proving” (v 3) are the same word in the text. The result of approval was a crown of life, which can be a present experience or a future crown. From the context of the entire section, the friendship idea found in 2:23 would support a present experience viewpoint.

1:13-16

Moving to 1:13-16, James introduces the subject of “tempting.” This is the same word in the text as “trial” in 1:2. [The translation in each case hinges on whether the intent is to harm or to help. While God allows testing to prove character and develop maturity, the test can become a temptation.] If a temptation overtakes a believer and gives birth to sin, the end result is death. Note again there is a progression to maturity in 1:2-4 and to death in 1:14-15, and a believer can take either road. Death, which means separation, can be understood as (1) eternal separation from God, (2) shortened physical life, or (3) lost fellowship. Here is where theological perspectives will begin to show.³ Nevertheless, if you understand that God saved and continues to save every believer [the emphasis of the verb form in Ephesians 2:8], then this death must relate to the loss of fellowship. There is also the possibility of a shortened physical life—“a sin *leading* to death” (1 John 5:16) if the believer continues to live in sin.

1:17-2:13

James then tells us that God is good and gracious, saving us “by the word of truth” (1:17-18). What followed are instructions for the believer—some dos and don’ts (1:19-21). In verse 21, “Receiving the word implanted” is not referencing to salvation as in verse 18, but to embracing the implanted word in order for the “saving of the believer’s [life]” (v 21).⁴ Since “save” means deliverance, from what is the Christian delivered? Seeing that the believer has already been

FREEDOM: SUSCEPTIBLE TO SIN'S BONDAGE

rescued from spiritual death at salvation (v 18), the other options are (1) deliverance from sin to experience fellowship or (2) deliverance from a premature death. As in verse 15 when *death* referred to a loss of fellowship, *saved* here refers to deliverance from the consequences of sin in order to experience intimacy in fellowship and fullness of *life* with Christ. James provided an illustration of what he meant by “saving your life” in 1:22-25.⁵ Believers are to internalize God’s word—looking intently at, abiding in, and obeying it. This is the choice of every believer and wise choices bring “blessing” (v 25), happiness or contentment, just as we saw verse 12. The benefit of knowing and keeping God’s word results in freedom from the inclination to sin and contentment through abundant living. James gave examples of what this looks like—serving others (1:26-27) and not showing favoritism (2:1-13).

2:14-20

Now, we come to a crucial passage, James 2:14-20, whose interpretation depends on your theological position. Specific verses in dispute are: “Can that faith save him?” (v 15c); “faith, if it has no works, is dead” (v 17), and “faith without works is useless” (v 20b). All would agree, from the text, that faith could be unresponsive or lifeless. First John 3:16–17 (again written to believers, “little children,” see verse 18) along with James 2:15-17 likewise indicate that words without action are of no value. The main issues that create divisions in theological positions are (1) who is being addressed?, (2) what does “save” mean?, and (3) what does “dead” mean? First, it has been established that James is writing to believers (1:2, 16; 2:1) and Abraham (2:21-24) serves as an illustration of an Old Testament saint from Genesis 15:6 (cf. Rom. 4:1-3). The logical conclusion is that James addressed born again believers (1:18) who have the option, like Abraham, to choose to experience companionship with Christ leading to maturity. This has been the argument of James up to this point and was the reason for including the illustration of Abraham.

Next, it must be decided just what one is delivered from: spiritual death (justification issue) or spiritual deadness (sanctification issue). From the context of James 1–2, sanctification rather than justification

ESCAPE

is in view.⁶ Finally, if a believer is not walking by faith in fellowship, “what he hears” (1:23-24) is of no value to him and “what he says” (2:15-16) is meaningless. Not only are his words empty (dead), but also without continuing to walk by faith he himself will begin to experience a living death (1:15), vanishing fellowship. This passage was addressed to believers and warned of a wasted, unproductive life. How you respond to and embrace the implanted word (1:21) matters—not proving if you are saved, but giving evidence of spiritual growth. That was the intention of the illustration of Abraham (2:21-24).

2:21-24

Certainly, believers, out of gratitude for what God has done and continues to do (Eph 2:8), should live according to His Word. Abraham was the illustration of the walk of faith, over a period of more than thirty years (2:21-24). The issue is not salvation (justification by faith).⁷ That was taken care of in Genesis 15:6: “Then he believed in the Lord; and He reckoned it to him as righteousness.” Paul explains that Abraham’s initial faith was not associated with works (Rom 4:1-3). However, James addressed the trial of Abraham in Genesis 22, some thirty-plus years later when his faith had matured. James didn’t use the Ishmael plan or the deceitful scheme with King Abimelech to illustrate the principle here. Those occasions were earlier in Abraham’s life, showing inconsistency in his walk of faith. Rather, James picks the trial with Isaac much later in Abraham’s life. Each step of faithful obedience over time developed “steadfastness” in faith (Jam 1:2) and “maturity” (1:4; 2:22). Abraham had held fast the implanted word of life, abided in it, and obeyed it. His faith was living, leading to close fellowship with and maturity in God. And God was pleased to call him, “His friend” (v 23).

Overview

Our review of James 1–2 points out key elements in this section of Scripture direct to believers and their potential. Between the bookends of “trials,” “faith,” and “maturity” we found the same “life-and-death” theme, which was previously discussed in Romans 8. As in

FREEDOM: SUSCEPTIBLE TO SIN'S BONDAGE

Romans 8, James contrasted abundant living through obedience with a living death from disobedience.

Content of James 1:13-15

We reach adulthood (Jam 1:4; 2:23) in the Christian life by walking in the light of God's word. The result is contentment (1:12, 25) and abundant living (1:21, 25). On the other hand, resisting God's word is to forget our privileges in Christ (1:23-24) and to experience spiritual deadness (1:15).

But why would you or I choose to forgo a close walk with Christ and a full and abundant life? Why wouldn't we trust in God in each and every decision? Romans 6 gives us the answer:

Knowing this, that our old self [unregenerate person] was crucified with *Him*, in order that our body of sin [propensity of sin in our flesh] might be done away with [rendered inoperative], so that we would no longer be slaves to sin" (v 6).

Even though the believer is a new person in Christ able to please God, he can also slip and revive the inclination to sin, serving sin rather than Christ (v 16). This was the reason for Paul's plea to "walk with respect to the Spirit" and "not with respect to the flesh" (Rom 8:4), "For the mind set on the flesh is death, but the mind set on the Spirit is life and peace" (v 6). Living the Christian life is about choosing life or death. Romans explains the *why* behind our unwise choices, but James 1:13-15 takes us through the *how* or actual process.

Who's to Blame?

Trials Christians face are for the positive purpose of proving and growing faith (1:2-4). As previously indicated, the word "trial" and "tempt" are the same Greek word. How it is used depends on whether the intent is to help or to harm. James assures us that God is never the source of temptation. He wrote, "Let no one say when he is tempted, 'I am being tempted by God'; for God cannot be tempted by evil, and He Himself does not tempt anyone" (v 13). James goes on to point out the culprit: "But each one is tempted when he is carried away and

ESCAPE

enticed by his own lust” (v 14). The problem is inward. We can choose to sin in response to the enticement of the world’s appeal.⁸ Due to our doubt in God’s character, we head down the path leading to sin. The very trial that should be an opportunity to develop our faith and trust in God instead begins to chip away at our walk with Christ.

How Does It Work?

Notice that temptation is a process of “being drawn away” and “being enticed” by one’s “own desires.”⁹ Seduced by the world’s call, verse 15 lays out just how sin develops and its ultimate consequence. Using the imagery of childbirth, James writes, “Then when lust [desire] has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and when sin is accomplished [fully formed], it brings forth death.” The temptation is not sin, but it can be the beginning, which can ultimately bring about the full-blown result. When the Christian fails to trust in God’s goodness, wrong choices have but one outcome. And when sin is “fully formed,” fellowship with Christ is gone, at least in one area of our life. But more than that—it is corrosive, eroding other areas of fellowship with Christ.

James tells us that *sinning is deliberate*. We allow ourselves to be overly exposed in an accumulative manner to temptations that pull us away from God’s best to experiences, places, and things that falsely satisfy. We forget that when we stand firm in the Word, we live; ignoring the Word, we die.

Illusions Regarding Sin

Paul’s inner struggle, which he shared in Romans 7, differs from the principles for Christian living presented in Romans 6. In fact, Romans 7 is a case study, using Paul’s real-life circumstances when he did not have a clear understanding how the believer relates to the Law. It was a how-not-to-do-it lesson. Romans 8 explains exactly how the principles of Romans 6 are to be applied. The truths of Romans 6 were addressed in chapter 3 of this book, and the application of those principles found in Romans 8 is in chapter 5. From Romans 7 we will look at the disillusionment Paul experienced.

FREEDOM: SUSCEPTIBLE TO SIN'S BONDAGE

First—Life Has No Struggles

When we come to Romans 7, we find that Paul was perplexed. He wrote, “What I am doing, I do not understand; for I am not practicing what I would like [desire] to do, but I am doing the very thing I hate [not desire]” (v 15). Continuing with the same line of thought, he wrote, “The good that I want [desire], I do not do, but I practice the very evil that I do not want [desire]” (v 19). As previously discussed in chapter 12, the author believes the situation in which Paul found himself referred to the time he was a new believer misinformed as how to walk with Christ.¹⁰ Coming from his pharisaical background he would naturally be influenced by his old perspective. I am suggesting Paul at that time continued to merely *externalize the Law* as a set of rules to be precisely kept. But he now noticed that his focus on the Law incited sin (v 8). Previously unaware, Paul now came face to face with an inner struggle realizing that he continued to have an inclination to sin even though he was a new person in Christ. He found that within two opposing choices were continually competing.

Nevertheless, even with Paul saying that each Christian faces a struggle with sin, unfortunately some teachers in the Church today continue to hold the view that a believer in Christ is free from any inner struggle, claiming that sin can be totally eradicated.¹¹ Others teach that, while sin is not eradicated, it cannot exercise dominion over the believer.¹² On the contrary, Paul experienced that struggle and came to understand—

The issue in Romans 6 is not that believers cannot be enslaved to sin, because the text states that believers can choose to be so enslaved (Rom. 6:15-23). Being dead to sin and its penalty, believers need not serve sin (Rom. 6:6). However, the potential of enslavement to sin is a reality in the Christian walk.¹³

Second—Believers Are Not Responsible for Their Actions

While Paul shared the solution to his perplexing problem in Romans 8, Romans 7 takes his readers through his personal struggle. He wrote, “If I am doing the very thing I do not want [desire], I am

ESCAPE

no longer the one doing it, but sin which dwells in me” (v 20). “His frustration that he cannot *accomplish* what he truly desires (i.e., obedience to God) is now resolved in the realization that his disobedience is in fact the *accomplishment* of sin.”¹⁴ Notice, first, that this verse tells us that Paul actually did do what he didn’t want to do. He did those very things based on choices made, as influenced by his propensity to sin in his outward man (cf. v 17). Second, when he said, “I am no longer the one doing it,” Paul referred to his new inner man or his new self, which can only please God.¹⁵ Actions, resulting from godly choices of the new inner man, would correspond to his desires to do what he truly wanted. As explained in Romans 8, only as the Christian lives, being influenced by the Spirit, will his behavior agree with the desires of his inner man. Remember, neither this text nor any other New Testament text points to the Spirit causing obedience. Rather, Christians themselves live, “doing” good as influenced by the Spirit or “doing” the wrong thing as influenced by their inclination to sin. Whether doing right or wrong, the way you live is a choice, rather than as a result of competing sources of power. Behavior is the sole responsibility of the person himself.

Third—Obedience Is Simple and Automatic

In Romans 7:22-23, Paul taught that he came to understand the dichotomy between two principles that were in conflict within him.

22 For I joyfully concur with the law of God [godly desires] in the inner man, 23 but I see a different law [fleshly desires] in the members of my body [outward man], waging war against the law of my mind [inner man’s desires] and making me a prisoner of the law of sin [outward man’s desires] which is in my members.

Paul points to two different laws that endeavor to influence his decisions and therefore his behavior. However notice that—

Paul does not share the illusion that some modern Christians have that if we have been regenerated then obedience to God’s law is both simple and natural [or automatic]. Such Christians

FREEDOM: SUSCEPTIBLE TO SIN'S BONDAGE

are forgetting a fact of which Paul was [had come] painfully conscious—that although the Spirit within us is life, the physical body [outer man] remains completely dead to God's will (see 8:10).¹⁶

Christian decisions, whether good or bad, lead to conduct with corresponding results—good or bad, godly or sinful. Those choices are neither simple nor automatic. This does not change in Romans 8, since the answer to Paul's dilemma was neither simple nor automatic (cf. Gal 5:16-23).

Fourth—No Rules Apply to Christians

As discussed in chapter 11 and in Appendix B, the author supports the position that the Christian's new inner man is composed of both an enlightened mind and a godly human spirit. First Corinthians 2:15-16 teaches that the believer's illumined mind can and should increasingly line up with the will of God through an ongoing evaluation of spiritual things. The process is analogous to Old Testament saints "inscribing the Law in their minds" (Prov 3:3; 7:2-3). This is the same way Christians are transformed in their walk with Christ—"by the renewing of your mind" (Rom 12:2). In both the Old and New Testaments, believers were and are to *internalize the law*, enabling a "walk in newness of life" (6:4).

Paul taught that mere external conformity to the letter of the law aroused sin (7:8). But because of the believer's union with Christ "we have been released from the Law, having died to that by which we were bound [held back], so that we serve in *newness of the Spirit* and not in *oldness of the letter* [written code]" (v 6, italics for emphasis). "Thus *the law* need no longer *hinder* those believers who have been under it... Instead, they are now free to serve in newness of the Spirit."¹⁷ Paul contrasted the legalistic perspective with the biblical attitude toward keeping the law. The former focuses on the *given-law*, as a check-off list to decide how one stands with God. On the other hand, the latter's center of attention is on the *law-Giver*. When the Mosaic Law is rightly understood to be the vehicle for fellowship, the idea of obeying the

ESCAPE

Law “to get” something or “to gain” approval is self-serving, not God honoring.¹⁸ Remember, the Law was given to His people who already had a relationship (being justified) with God. Here, the wakeup call was that real life is not experienced via the pharisaical “oldness of the letter” but instead through the “newness of the Spirit.”

Nevertheless, since Paul taught that Christians “have been released from the [Mosaic] Law” (v 6), some teachers have the misconception that the law or any guidelines for living the Christian life are non-existent. Such teachers neglect to address the many commands of the New Testament directed toward believers. In each case, obedience to those commands is not optional. Even though not in a list as in the Mosaic Law, both Paul and James defined these commands as the “law of Christ” (Gal 6:2) and the “law of liberty” (Jam 2:25).

No Victims Here

You aren't a victim. Satan doesn't force you do anything against your will and there isn't some mysterious power of sin. How you respond to a temptation is a choice. This is very reason Paul wrote to the church in Corinth.

No temptation has overtaken you but such as is common to man; and God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation will provide the way of escape also, so that you will be able to endure it (1 Cor 10:13).

James 1:2 tells us that believers will “encounter various trials,” not only a variety but also a plurality. Count on it, you will experience trials. So, what are you going to do when you face the next one? Respond wisely, grow and mature (v 4) or respond poorly and forfeit more than you realize (v 15). Nevertheless the promise of 1 Corinthians 10:13 assures the Christian that God provides the means to escape each and every temptation.¹⁹ While some explain the “means of escape” is attributed to the presumed “empowerment of the Spirit,” the biblical way is to allow the Spirit to influence you so that you come through the trial with the right perspective.

FREEDOM: SUSCEPTIBLE TO SIN'S BONDAGE

Bondage to Bondage

It's counterintuitive to think that the way to escape one kind of slavery is to place yourself under another one. Nevertheless, that is exactly the way Christians deal with sin. Paul explained, "Do you not know that when you present yourselves to someone *as* slaves for obedience, you are slaves of the one whom you obey, either of sin resulting in death, or of obedience resulting in righteousness?" (Rom 6:16). Freedom from sin (v 7) becomes a reality only when a believer places himself in service to God. Choosing to become a slave or servant of God leads to real life and is the only wise choice.

