

CHAPTER 1

FREEDOM: POSITION OR EXPERIENCE

The majesty of El Capitan at Yosemite National Park is breathtaking. The sheer, southwest face of this massive rock formation rises upward 3,000 feet from the floor of the valley to penetrate the blue California sky. Is it no wonder artists try to capture this spectacular site with pencil and sketchpad, watercolors or oils. While the technique may vary, each depicts their impression of this magnificent scene.

Likewise various biblical writers have different ways of communicating a biblical idea. The subject matter is identical, but words chosen to express the same thought often vary. Illustrations are provided below.

Justification

When Paul and James addressed the biblical truth of justification, meaning to declare righteous, they noted the connection between faith and works.¹

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Illustrated in Romans

In the context of Romans, Paul taught that justification was exclusively by faith in Christ; no works of any kind were required. For Paul there was the paramount necessity to distinguish faith and works. In fact, Paul portrayed faith and works to be diametrically opposed to one another and argued that the works of the Law could not justify anyone. Why? The purpose of the Law never, ever was for justification, as he explained, “For if a law had been given which was able to impart life, then righteousness would indeed have been based on law” (Gal 3:21).² In Romans, Paul wrote, “For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from works of the Law” (Rom 3:28).

As Paul moved from the principle of justification by faith (3:21-31) to the illustration of justification by faith from the Old Testament (4:1-25), he used Abraham to prove his point (4:2-5).

2 For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God. 3 For what does the Scripture say? “Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness.” 4 Now to the one who works, his wage is not credited as a favor, but as what is due. 5 But to the one who does not work, but believes in Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is credited as righteousness.

Paul turned to Genesis 15:6 where it says that Abraham was declared righteous by faith alone and not by works. Obviously, Paul’s concern was to point out that works cannot impart life but also that life only comes from God. Salvation, which is by grace through faith, and being declared righteous are both the work of God. Man’s works are futile regarding the new birth and right standing before God.

Illustrated in James

James, on the other hand, comes from an entirely different perspective on justification. He appears to throw a hand grenade into the mix when he also used Genesis 15:6 and taught that Abraham was justified by both faith and works (Jam 2:21-24).

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21 Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered up Isaac his son on the altar? 22 You see that faith was working with his works, and as a result of the works, faith was perfected; 23 and the Scripture was fulfilled which says, “And Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness,” and he was called the friend of God. 24 You see that a man is justified by works and not by faith alone.

Many understand James to teach that justification is by faith and then validated by works. They defend the position that if works are not evident, regeneration and justification are nonexistent.³ Nevertheless, there is another and a better way to interpret this text. In fact, there are two ways to be justified, but they are independent from, yet related to one another and occur in a consecutive manner. Justification by faith takes place at the new birth. This occurred with Abraham in Genesis 15:6 and is identical to Paul’s teaching in Romans 4. Works are unnecessary since they would be absolutely ineffective in gaining eternal life. For James, while works had nothing to do with regeneration, his concern was for evidence of a believer’s growth following regeneration. That is the reason James points us to the example of Abraham offering up Isaac (Jam 2:21; Gen 22:1-14).

Faith-justification relates only to regeneration; works-justification refers to maturity in the Christian life for those who are already saved. James claimed, “as a result of the works...Scripture was fulfilled” (Jam 2:22b-23a). What was fulfilled? Abraham’s faith-righteousness became a reality in his life, in his works. His faithful obedience to God gave evidence of his righteous standing. Abraham had become who he already was positionally. And the result: “he was called the friend of God” (v 23b). Works-justification, being declared righteous by works, logically and chronologically follows faith-justification. Notice that works-justification cannot occur *before* faith-justification and cannot ever occur *without* faith-justification. Faith-justification concerns one’s position before God, while works-justification is a confirmation that the Christian is experiencing fellowship and intimacy with God. While faith-justification (possessing eternal life) is a completed fact, works-justification (experiencing abundant life) can be a continual, present

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possibility. For Abraham in Genesis 22, his faithful works demonstrated that he had actually become what God had declared him to be back in Genesis 15:6.

Both Paul and James addressed the relationship of justification to faith and works. Yet, as we have seen, they explained justification in different ways for entirely different purposes. Both lines of reasoning were determined by the particular point each wanted to make.

Sanctification

“The word *sanctify* basically means to set apart. It has the same root as the words *saint* and *holy*.”⁴ Holiness and holy living are contingent on the Christian being set apart from or being separated from that which hinders a person’s walk with God. As shown in chart 1-1, the verb “to set free” was used only seven times in the New Testament. These texts provide insight into sanctification. Like justification, sanctification is both positional and experiential.

Freed from Sin

John 8:30-32 addressed the idea of believers in Christ being set free from sin.

30 As He spoke these things, many came to believe in Him. **31**
So Jesus was saying to those Jews who had believed Him, “If
you continue in My word, *then* you are truly disciples of Mine;
32 and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.

In the context of John 8, Christ addressed a crowd and “as He spoke these things, many came to believe in Him” (v 30). With the use of the expression *believe in Him*, John indicated that those individuals were persuaded, trusting in Jesus, and the result was new life.⁵ Then to those new believers Jesus said, “If you continue in My word, *then* you are truly disciples of Mine; and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free” (vv 31-32). Notice the progression. Beyond knowing Jesus as savior, there is additional truth to be learned if they continue (to remain, abide) in His word. Following the new birth, Christians can experience freedom but only if they are “abiding in His word.”

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1-1

TO SET FREE

- John 8:32** And you will know the truth, and the truth **will make you free**.
- 8:36** So if the Son **makes you free**, you will be free indeed.
- Rom 6:18** And **having been freed** from sin, you became slaves of righteousness.
- 6:22** But now **having been freed** from sin and enslaved to God.
- 8:2** For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus **has set you free** from the law of sin and of death.
- 8:21** That the creation itself also **will be set free** from its slavery to corruption into the freedom of the glory of the children of God.
- Gal 5:1** It was for freedom that Christ **set us free**; therefore keep standing firm and do not be subject again to a yoke of slavery.

While salvation is through believing, experiencing freedom is the result of abiding. Salvation is a gift; experiencing freedom is a choice. The obvious question is “freed from what?” Verses 33-36 gives the answer.

33 They answered Him, “We are Abraham’s descendants and have never yet been enslaved to anyone; how is it that You say, ‘You will become free’?” **34** Jesus answered them, “Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who commits sin is the slave of sin. **35** The slave does not remain in the house forever; the son does remain forever. **36** So if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed.

The crowd that followed Jesus questioned His remark concerning freedom (v 33). As Abraham’s descendants, they insisted that they had never been enslaved and therefore had always been free. Jesus responded,

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“Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who commits sin is the slave of sin” (v 34). Unless a person is a son or heir of God through faith he remains enslaved to sin (v 35; Rom 4:13). Concluding, Christ said, “So if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed” (John 8:36). Not only were these objectors unable to understand their spiritual condition, they also failed to believe in the only One who could liberate them.⁶

However, positional freedom was not John’s concern for those who “continue in [His] word.” For those abiding disciples, freedom related to being free from sin, the propensity to sin, in their daily walk. Continually abiding in Jesus’ word goes beyond just reading or being exposed to His teachings. It involves embracing His word: knowing, understanding, and allowing it to impact and influence life. It simply means obeying the teachings of Christ. Abiding is choice. Consequently, being free from serving sin is a choice. When a believer decides to live in harmony with Christ, only then will he truly experience freedom.

Paul accounts for every other time the verb *to set free* was used in the New Testament. While Romans 8:21 refers to a future event at Christ’s return, when creation is delivered from the corruption of sin, the references in Romans 6 deal with Christians who were positionally set free from sin at salvation.⁷ In both verse 18 and 22, Paul taught that at salvation a person is no longer enslaved to sin, but is now enslaved to God (see “servitude” theme in chapter 3). Consequently, the student of the Word must differentiate *positional* “freedom from sin” used by Paul from *experiential* “freedom from sin” by John.

Freed from Mosaic Law

In the remaining verses (Rom 8:2 and Gal 5:1), the scope of freedom expands to include liberation (1) from the law of sin and of death and (2) from the Mosaic Law. In Romans 8:2, “the law of the Spirit of life” is contrasted with “the law of sin and death,” with the former law liberating the believer from the latter one. Both of these laws, in the sense of governing principles, are influences at work in the believer.⁸ The law of sin, which results in death, is also addressed in Romans 7:22-23. In that particular passage, Paul wrote of the conflict that is the experience of each Christian where the believer’s inclination

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to sin can overwhelm his desire to obey God. The Christian can choose to become subservient sin, resulting in the loss of intimacy with God and thus experiencing temporal dead. When a believer is enslaved to sin, the operating principle of “the law of sin and of death” is at work in his life (8:2). The antidote is “the law of the Spirit of life,” meaning the believer can choose to allow the Spirit to influence his thinking and actions and to experience abundant living (John 10:10b). Eternal life begins the moment a person believes in Christ (John 2:8), a positional truth; abundant life is the experience of walking in fellowship with Christ, an experiential truth (see “life-or-death” theme in chapter 2 of this book). Walking in fellowship with Christ leads to enriched living, setting a Christian free from serving sin and ending in a wasted life.

Galatians 5:1 immediately follows the Hagar-Sarah allegory (4:21-31). Throughout the early portions of Galatians, Paul continually warned believers not to be deceived by the Judaizers and place themselves under the Mosaic Law. Then through an allegory, Paul sets forth the argument that “believers are children of promise, like Isaac, not children of bondage, like Hagar’s son.”⁹ With that backdrop, Paul wrote, “It was for freedom that Christ set us free; therefore keep standing firm and do not be subject again to a yoke of slavery” (5:1). Again, one must ask, “From what are believers set free?” The logical answer from the context is freedom from the Mosaic Law. Notice, however, that the text tells us that Christians are set free from the Law in order to experience freedom. *It was for freedom [experiential freedom] that Christ set us free [positional freedom].* As children of promise and therefore positionally free, Paul gives two commands: “keep standing firm” and “do not be subject again to a yoke of slavery [bondage to the Mosaic Law].” As discussed above, Christians are positionally free in order that they can choose to experience freedom from sin by following Christ. The result of standing firm and choosing to serve God is the “fruit of the Spirit” (vv 22-23), while the “deeds of the flesh” (vv 19-21) are the end product of choosing to serve sin.

Since the Law exposes sin (Rom 4:15; 7:1), promotes sin (7:8) and results in death or lost fellowship (7:10), we should conclude that to be free from either the Law or sin is to be free from the other as

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well. In fact, Paul seemed to confirm that view in Galatians 5:13 when he wrote, “For you were called to freedom, brethren; only *do not turn* your freedom into an opportunity for the flesh.” Paul moved from experiential freedom from the Law (v 1), or legalism, to experiential freedom from sin (v 13), or libertinism. Paul then discussed freedom with respect to the believer’s walk in the Spirit (vv 14-26).

Freed to Live

The use of “to set free” in the New Testament is *always* directed to believers and predominately refers the freedom from sin. The emphasis of both John and Paul was that believers (*positionally freed* from sin) could choose to be either slaves to their propensity to sin through disobedience (*experientially enslaved* to sin) or slaves to God through obedience (*experientially freed* from sin). Nevertheless, John and Paul used different terms when writing of freedom in the Christian life. As shown in chart 1-2, John addressed the believer’s freedom with the expression *abiding in Christ* (John 8:31-32). On the other hand, Paul took another approach indicating freedom occurred as the believer *walks with respect to the Spirit* (Rom 8:4, 12-13; Gal 5:16). Notice that when John referred to the Christian life lived by “abiding in Christ,” he did not emphasize the ministry of the Spirit. In the important sections on Christian living (John 8, 14-15), John used “abide” nineteen times, compared to only three times for the “Spirit.” Paul, however, emphasized the Spirit’s ministry thirty-one times in reference to the Christian life (Rom 8; Gal 5), excluding the term *abiding* altogether. Nevertheless, John understood that the Spirit ministers to believers. In John 14:16-17, 26, he wrote of the indwelling Helper.¹⁰ Yet, in Christ’s vine-branches/abiding teaching recorded in John 15, the emphasis on abiding is choosing to obey Christ’s commands. James, likewise, took the same stance.

As discussed above, James 2 addresses both positional justification (entering into new life) as well as experiential justification (sanctification through faithful obedience). Further, James confirmed that “abiding in Christ” or “abiding in His Word” is the believer’s choice in order to experience enriched living.

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1-2

ABIDE & SPIRIT USAGE

Author	Book	Chapter	Abide	Spirit
John	John	8	3	0
		14	4	2
		15	12	1
		All	41	24
Paul	Romans	8	0	23
		All	1	36
Paul	Galatians	5	0	8
		All	0	18
James	James	1-2	1	0
		All	1	1

But one who looks intently at the perfect law, the *law* of liberty, and abides by it, not having become a forgetful hearer but an effectual doer, this man will be blessed in what he does (Jam 1:25, underline for emphasis).¹¹

Notice again that James, when he wrote this early book,¹² referred to obedience *without* an emphasis on the Spirit's ministry.¹³ One should ask, "Were both John and James amiss in not emphasizing a work of the Spirit in Christian living?" I want to suggest that these two writers stress one or both facets (positional or experiential) of justification and

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sanctification. No matter whether “abiding in Christ” or “walking with respect to the Spirit” is used to address Christian living, it is evident that they are *equivalent biblical concepts*.

Capturing the Majesty

Describing Christian living is likened to capturing the grandeur of El Capitan. The biblical writers used different expressions to convey authentic Christian living. The chapters of this book provide insight to the biblical texts explaining how to experience the Christian life. While many Christian books seem to emphasize a particular viewpoint to the exclusion of the total picture, the author believes a fresh look is need, providing an *Escape* to biblical reality.