

## John 8:31-36 - Free to Be Who Jesus Made Me to Be<sup>1</sup>

**Before the lesson** – Prepare the handout, “Free to Be Who Jesus Made Me to Be” for the Transformational Exercise. You may use the back of this page for the word cloud exercise in the Information session, or you may use a different piece of paper.

**Fellowship Question:** (Use *one* of these to break the ice, begin some discussion, and lead into the study):

What image or phrase comes to mind when I say this word: freedom? Is the image or phrase one of “freedom from” or is it “freedom to?”

What is one thing you are bound to? (a contract, a vow, a formal or informal commitment, etc.)

### Information

In this unit, we have called John’s Gospel, “The Gospel of Abundance.”<sup>2</sup> Abundant means, “more than enough.” God’s grace is so abundant, John describes it as “grace on grace” (1:16). (I think of those cupcakes that have abundant toppings - “icing on icing.” So much more than enough!)

Jesus offers everyone in the world an abundant life. John’s stories about Jesus point to this kind of life. In his first miracle or sign, Jesus turns more water into wine than would be reasonably consumed at a wedding. Likewise, so much bread was created in the feeding of the 5,000+ that a dozen full baskets were collected after everyone had their fill. John will conclude his gospel by saying that if all the stories of God’s abundance through Jesus were to have been collected and written, “the world itself could not contain the books that would be written.” (21:25).

“John continually emphasizes this abundance... ‘Eternal life’ is his most common phrase for it, and this is a life of love, beginning now, to which community is intrinsic: it is life together with others. The end of the prologue indicates the fullest expression of this life: the love between the Father and the Son to whom all are invited. Coping with an abundance of love might be seen as the central challenge of John’s Gospel.”<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> This lesson is copyrighted by Dr. Rick Jordan, Great Bible Teachers, Inc., 2023. More lessons may be found at [greatbibleteachers.com](http://greatbibleteachers.com).

<sup>2</sup> The title is taken from David F. Ford, *The Gospel of John: A Theological Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2021), 1.

<sup>3</sup> Ford, 39.

The invitation to live this abundant life is universal: “Let *anyone* who is thirsty come to me, and let the one who believes in me drink” (7:37). The abundant life is for everyone. Anyone means anyone.

An abundant life means more than material abundance. It begins with an acceptance of the truth that we have been living in a world of lies. One of those lies is that your value is judged by your status, your ethnicity, your Grade Point Average, or your net worth.

What is the problem with being judged by these identity markers?

There is nothing wrong with any of these - unless they bind us. Jesus offers to set us free from anything that limits our freedom to become who God created us to be.

- Distribute paper and pencils/pens.

We are going to try to gain some insight about freedom by doing a word cloud. Write the word “freedom” in the middle of your page. What words, phrases, or images come to your mind when you see the word freedom? Draw a line from the word and write that word or phrase. We will have 5 minutes of silence to do this exercise. Make as many lines from the word freedom as you can in that time.

[After five minutes have passed, say:]

As you look at your “tangents, choose one to share with us. I’ll give you a minute to review your tangents and choose one to share.

{After a minute of silence, ask:]What is one word, phrase, or image you would like to share with us?

When we trust in Jesus and declare ourselves to be followers of Jesus, what does that mean we are free from? (fear, sin and its penalties, separation from God and others, etc.)

It is clear in the Gospel of John that persons are free to accept or reject Jesus. Some people were “early adopters” who followed Jesus from the time he invited them to “follow me, come and see.” Others, like his own brothers, weren’t so sure. The Samaritan woman in John 4 had an instant conversion. Nicodemus seems to have become a supporter and a defender of Jesus, and possibly a follower - but we have no public declaration of faith. Other persons rejected Jesus and were threatened enough by his message that they created a plan for his capture, torture, and crucifixion.

In John 8, the struggle between Jesus and his doubters and enemies continues. He claims to be telling the truth about his relationship with God, his Father. Some believed that Jesus was telling the truth. Many insisted that this could not be true.

As you hear this passage, listen for themes related to truth and freedom.

- Have a class member read John 8:31-36.

Truth. Some things we know to be true, yet we do not live as if they are. Can you think of examples in health, government, personal relationships, etc.? (we may not eat the right things or exercise as we know we should; “all men are created equal” is not yet fully lived out; we say things we know will hurt and that we cannot take back, etc.)

If there are things we know to be true and yet we do not live as if they are, in what way(s) does that make us a slave to our ignorance or rejection of truth?

Jesus continues with the theme of freedom versus slavery, being a child versus being a slave in a family setting.

“The issue of being free is quite significant in the ancient agrarian economies of antiquity in which enslavement and slaveholding were a part of daily experience. Freed persons were of significantly lower social status than free persons who were never enslaved. To tell free persons that the truth will make them free is rather insulting.”<sup>4</sup>

What do we mean, in a spiritual sense, by the word freedom?

Here is one theologian’s illustration of freedom: “Freedom implies freedom from and freedom for. One is free to the extent that he or she is able to become a free human being, nothing more and nothing less. This means freedom from all which prevents fulfillment as a human being. When is a bird free? Is it not free when it is able to fly, to sing, to nest, to migrate?”<sup>5</sup>

We put great value in our American culture on an individual’s freedom. There are limits, of course, but generally, we feel that a person should be free to choose their friends and spouses, their jobs, their places to live, and so forth. “Free as a bird” is a value we cherish. “I’ve got to be me” is another American mantra declaring our freedom.

---

<sup>4</sup> Bruce J. Malina and Richard L. Rohrbaugh, *Social Science Commentary on the Gospel of John* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998), 161.

<sup>5</sup> Frank Stagg, *Polarities of Human Existence in Biblical Perspective* (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 1994), 107-108.

Yet, freedom is also found as we are in relationship with others.

“In contemporary American culture when someone asks, ‘Who are you?’ we immediately assume that the questioner wants to know how the person being questioned differs from all other individuals...In the world of the New Testament, when someone asked, ‘Who are you?’ he or she normally expected to hear some kind of group identifier like, ‘son of Joseph from Nazareth’ (John 1:45) or ‘descendent of Abraham’ (John 8:33).”<sup>6</sup>

“When is a drilling bit free? Is it not free when it is able to function as a drilling bit? But a bit is bound at the very time it is free. Being part of a larger tool is part of its fulfillment, its freedom to be a drilling bit. For us to be free does not mean independence from all that is not oneself. We are free when our relationship with God, other people, all aspects of self, and our total situation is such that we can emerge and function as authentic persons....Only as we are bound to one another are we free.”<sup>7</sup>

What is your response to his concluding sentence, “Only as we are bound to one another are we free?”

Ironically, freedom includes boundaries. A friend who is a songwriter-singer explained to me that boundaries are a gift to a songwriter. “Write a song about freedom” is much too broad. But if one puts boundaries, we find handles and images - “write a song about the freedom to spend your money how you want to.” Creativity thrives with tangible boundaries. God gave us boundaries we call the Ten Commandments that are more specific than, “be nice.”

How do boundaries in other areas of life give us freedom?

Freedom is God’s gift.

We even have the freedom to misuse our freedom. We have “free” will.

“God’s will is in no sense behind evil. God’s will is behind the freedom which makes possible both good and evil, but God’s will is not behind the evil which is misused freedom. It follows that God permits evil because God permits freedom.”<sup>8</sup>

Some of those who heard Jesus speak and watched Jesus work believed in him. Others rejected Jesus and the truth he offered them.

---

<sup>6</sup> Malina and Rohrbaugh, 163.

<sup>7</sup> Stagg, 108.

<sup>8</sup> Stagg, 121.

“Speaking primarily of Israel, Paul [says] if Jews are lost, they are lost for precisely the same reason Gentiles are lost, not because of any divine determination of failing but because the offered salvation is rejected. In a carefully constructed passage, Paul shows that God’s salvation is as near as the word in one’s mouth, as near as faith in one’s heart (Rom 10:7-13). All one needs to do is to trust and call upon the God who already has entrusted himself to us and called out to us.”<sup>9</sup>

- Have a class member read Romans 10:8-13, 20-21.

“One problem alone is beyond divine determination [is] a human’s own unpredictable will. One can hear or turn a deaf ear. One can trust or distrust. If one remains lost, it is by that one’s choice and not God’s determination. In the face of one’s refusal to respond, God can only say, ‘All the day long I have stretched out my hands to a people disobedient and gainsaying’ (Rom 10:21).”<sup>10</sup>

### **Transformational Exercise**

- Distribute the handout, “Free to Be Who Jesus Made Me to Be.”

“God’s initiative does not do away with human freedom, but rather intensifies it. Human freedom increases in direct proportion to human involvement with God in trust and love, because God created freedom, and it is fulfilled through trust in its Creator.”<sup>11</sup>

The freedom that Jesus is most concerned about is not a nationalistic freedom or an individualistic freedom. Jesus wants us to be free from sin and its penalties. Here are some questions to ponder:

- How can a person live in an atheistic nation yet be spiritually free?
- How can a person have no individual rights and freedoms yet be spiritually free?
- What truth am I ignoring or rejecting that therefore limits my spiritual freedom?
- Am I willing to turn over to Jesus any barrier to my spiritual freedom?
- Am I willing to know the truth and to be transformed - to be set free?

[After allowing time for personal reflection, close by reading this prayer together:]

*Lord God,*

---

<sup>9</sup> Stagg, 123.

<sup>10</sup> Stagg, 123.

<sup>11</sup> Ford, 151.

*You give me the gift of freedom,  
guiding me to a life of joy,  
calling me to be my truest self.  
As you freed Lazarus from the burial cloths,  
and gave sight to the blind,  
and called the rich man to detachment,  
free me from the unfreedoms that pile up,  
which blockade me from the life-giving joy you have for me.  
Remove those things that hinder my life with you.  
I can freely choose this. And I do.  
Amen.<sup>12</sup>*

---

<sup>12</sup> Prayer by Andy Otto, the creator and editor of GodInAllThings.com. This prayer is found at <https://godinallthings.com/prayer/freedom-a-meditation/>.

## Free to Be Who Jesus Made Me to Be

“God’s initiative does not do away with human freedom, but rather intensifies it. Human freedom increases in direct proportion to human involvement with God in trust and love, because God created freedom, and it is fulfilled through trust in its Creator.”<sup>13</sup>

Here are some questions to ponder:

- How can a person live in an atheistic nation yet be spiritually free?
- How can a person have no individual rights and freedoms yet be spiritually free?
- What truth am I ignoring or rejecting that therefore limits my spiritual freedom?
- Am I willing to turn over to Jesus any barrier to my spiritual freedom?
- Am I willing to know the truth and to be transformed - to be set free?

Lord God,  
You give me the gift of freedom,  
guiding me to a life of joy,  
calling me to be my truest self.  
As you freed Lazarus from the burial cloths,  
and gave sight to the blind,  
and called the rich man to detachment,  
free me from the unfreedoms that pile up,  
which block me from the life-giving joy you have for me.  
Remove those things that hinder my life with you.  
I can freely choose this. And I do.  
Amen.<sup>14</sup>

---

<sup>13</sup> David F. Ford, *The Gospel of John: A Theological Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2021), 151.

<sup>14</sup> Prayer by Andy Otto, the creator and editor of GodInAllThings.com. This prayer is found at <https://godinallthings.com/prayer/freedom-a-meditation/>.