

John 8:31-59

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[0 : 00] About two and a half thousand years ago, a man named Plato told a famous story. It was about a band of human beings who, for as long as they could remember, lived their lives in a dark cave.

Now we would look at those human beings and we would say that their life was heartbreaking. They were chained by the legs and by the neck, so all that they could look at were the shadows on the cave wall.

We would say those men were slaves. The thing is, they didn't know that they were anything of the sort. For as long as they could remember, this dark cave had been their life.

Those shadows on the wall had been their world. The chains were just part of what it meant for them to be human. And if you came to one of those men, offering them a key and telling them that on the outside was a whole beautiful world bustling with colour and laughter and love and life, they would have thought you were mad.

They would have gone back to watching the daytime TV show of Shadows on the Wall. That for them was their real world. The cave was their prison, but to them the prison had almost become invisible.

[1 : 21] And according to Plato, a philosopher only would have been brave enough to explore the light. And then you'd be doomed to try in vain to lead others out into it.

And if you'd force one of the men to turn around, the light would have been so bright and searing that they would have run back into the darkness. If you went back in pity to try and drag one of those inmates out into the real world, they would have almost certainly tried to kill you, thinking the light has just driven you insane.

And John 8, from verse 31 onwards, that was read to you, is an extraordinary story that has many similarities to what Plato said.

Last week, you remember that we met the prisoners in the cave. Three times, Jesus said that this world and all of us who belong to it will die in our sins unless we receive him as God.

Because there's someone who's come down who is greater than any philosopher. The eternal son of the father. The only true light of the whole world.

[2 : 34] The very same burning light who led God's people out of the land of slavery all those centuries before. And led them into the land that promised eternal rest.

Something's echoing, isn't it? Is it me? Something's echoing. See if you can sort it out, lads. And today, he offers those prisoners something truly wonderful who will follow his light.

Jesus says, I can set you free forever to live in such a light. And light and love. That you'd never want anything else. And best of all, what I can give you, Jesus offers, is the right to truly belong.

No imposter syndrome. No doubts that one day it might be taken away from you. Through the sun. To be set free, Jesus says, is to be free indeed.

You will be a son forever in the sun. And that is a truly wonderful thing to give, isn't it? And yet, what is the response of the people in the cave?

[3 : 40] Well, when he pointed down their claims last week, he's got their attention. Can you see verse 30? Many believed in him. But we've seen, haven't we, Jesus' skepticism of Israel's belief in this book.

He knows what is in all men. And so today, he talks to those new believers. And verse 31 is addressed to people who seem to be believers. And says, here is what it will look like if you are truly my disciples.

Those who listen to me and follow. This is what a disciple is. He's a follower. Those who follow where only the light of the world could lead out into truth and freedom.

And almost immediately in verse 33, the prisoners in the cave begin to bristle with indignation. And by the end of the chapter, the people who believe in him in verse 31, can you see that?

Are picking up stones to stone him in verse 59. It's an astonishing difference. Jesus has come to give something wonderful and yet they cannot see it.

[4 : 47] In fact, they cannot bear it. Because the prison walls have become invisible to them. This world of sin and death and deceit is all they've ever known.

Two things that John shows us as chapter 8 draws to a close. The depths of human need and the height of Jesus' grace. So first verses 31 to 47.

The depth of human need. Because the only thing more heartbreaking than being trapped in a prison of sin and death and deceit. Is to live in that prison thinking it's your best life now.

And so here is Jesus' message to all of mankind. Even though you don't know it, you really do need to be set free by a true son.

What is a true disciple? A true disciple is somebody who abides or remains in Jesus' word. And if you are truly my disciple, Jesus says, you will persevere following my life.

[5 : 55] Wherever I lead. That's the person who knows the truth and is set free by it. So can you see what real faith is? Real faith isn't just about believing certain things about God.

It is more than that. Real faith is receiving and following the one who is truth. You can see that in verse 32. Can you see it?

In verse 32, what is it that sets them free? What is it that sets us free? It's the truth. But in verse 36, who is it that sets us free? The son that sets us free.

So there is a particular truth, isn't there? That sets free human beings. And that truth is Jesus himself. All that he was revealing about himself.

So do you remember last time we saw that he is the divine son of God. The one sent from heaven to storm the walls of our prison. And to lead us where only he could ever lead us.

[6 : 55] Into God's rest. It's as if Jesus has sawn through the bars of the cell window. He's tied together the bedsheets. And he holds out a hand to the inmates.

And in verse 33, they immediately look at him. And they say, what is wrong with you? This isn't a prison. This is a palace. Look at all the pretty posters I put up on my wall.

How do you free someone who will not accept that they're a slave? In Israel's case, it was a tragic false assurance that it's holding them chained.

They respond to Jesus and they say, we are Abraham's children. We've never been slaves. It's an absurd level of self-denial, isn't it?

If there's one thing that's dominated Israel's history, it's been slavery. From the very beginning, they were forced to bake bricks in Egypt. To the very end, where they sat down by the rivers of Babylon.

[8 : 04] And they wept. And their captives, captors, forced them to sing the songs of Zion. Now they know that. Obviously, they are speaking, aren't they, in the spiritual sense.

They're saying, we might be slaves of Rome right now. But we're not slaves in here. We are the ones that God chose. We are Abraham's offspring. We are God's children. Children, there's a sense, isn't there, of religious privilege.

That runs so deep in them. That they can't even see their need. And that tragically can creep into a church like ours.

I'm up to my neck in church. I get up early to serve. I make the coffee. I stack the chairs. I play the music. I've done it all my life.

I'm here to make sure that the church keeps going for the outsiders. It's them that need all of this. And so Jesus has to point out to you and I the monster that lives in our lives.

[9 : 09] That we've grown so used to that we don't see it anymore. The greatest slave master in the world isn't the government. It's not the Romans nor the Babylonians.

It's not Vladimir Putin. The thing that holds human beings slaves is not the authoritarian rules coming out of the government. It's not cancel culture. It isn't poverty.

It is not debt. The thing that enslaves us most is actually something that we quite like. Which makes it the most addictive power on earth.

It's sin. And you might think of your sin like a gambler thinks of his cards or his betting. You know the gambler what the gambling addict always says.

He says well I can stop whenever I want. The gambler thinks that he can control the cards. The gambler says I can walk away from it whenever I choose.

[10:10] And Jesus says no sin controls you. And its price is the thing that he pointed out so clearly last week. Because sin holds us.

That eventually judgment and death will get the better of us. So however attractive life might look following our own rules.

Ultimately that life is slavery and not freedom. And it only ends one way. And if you don't believe it try to go for one day.

Pick tomorrow. Pick tomorrow. Try one day without thinking or feeling or doing anything. That you wouldn't be ashamed of other people knowing.

And you will know that you can't do it can you? You might pretend not to see the prison walls. But we know that we're trapped. We are born aren't we into a self-centered world.

[11:13] With bars on the window and on the doors. And even those of us who have been born into the most wonderful religious privilege on earth. If we're slaves then all of that religious privilege.

Is not something we will be able to cling on to forever. Think of a slave. A slave might live and work in a house. But that house is not his home is it?

At the end of the day the slave just belongs to someone. Like property belongs. So he never really belongs to anyone. The slave can be sold on to the next person.

Whereas the son. The son belongs in a completely different category doesn't he? And I wonder how much deep down the real ache inside of us is actually a longing to belong to someone.

Because ultimately that is what it means to be free. It's counterintuitive. So we think don't we have all those poor kids. Some of you are in school with them. Desperately trying to forge an identity to fit in.

[12:28] Maybe that's you. You're desperate to fit in. So with one crowd you're this person. And then in another crowd you're another person. You're like a chameleon that fits in. Wherever they are.

Desperately doing anything just to belong. Think of folk trying to pursue relationships. Trying to find an identity in that.

Whatever the cost for them emotionally. And to their souls. And we long for it. And so what a wonderful thing it is that the true son of God came to give human beings.

And he says I will give you the right to be children of God. To belong. To belong where I have belonged forever. In the love that I have always known.

It is a belonging isn't it? So deep. So secure. That you will never have to worry about your place. Ever again. You don't have to earn it. The son gives it to you.

[13:28] You will never again have to fear that if you put a foot out of line. Or wear the wrong clothes. Or get something embarrassingly wrong. Or misspeak. Or mess up in a shameful way.

That you'll be cast out of the group. Because to belong like that. That's freedom isn't it? I wonder whether you realise.

It's so strange isn't it? That the most beautiful freedom we could ever get. Is not by going our own way. But by following someone else where he leads.

That is utterly transformational. Do you realise that the most beautiful freedom you could ever know. Is not by going your own way. But by following someone else where he leads.

And trusting him. And I suspect for most of us who are Christians this evening. That freedom is actually way more radical than we fully realise. Because he who is set free by the son is free indeed.

[14:34] Do you get that? It doesn't mean you're sinless. Not yet. But something utterly radical has happened to your nature.

Something utterly radical has happened to your identity. Suddenly. It is possible to break the habit. To break the hold.

That sin has. And all of a sudden when you feel tempted and trapped by sin. It is actually possible to say. Look who I am.

I'm a son now. I'm not a slave. I have the son living in me by his spirit. I can grow into this family of love. To be more like my elder brother.

Not perfect. Not always. But I can truly say no. I can fight back. I can resist.

[15:39] There is never a sin that I have to say yes to. There is always an escape by God's grace. There is always a way out. And in a congregation like this tonight.

There will be somebody that needs to hear that. We all need to hear that. Don't we? That there is a way out. You don't have to say yes to your sin.

And when I fall. And when I'm deeply ashamed. I can get up off the mat.

Because I am as loved as ever I was. And that is freedom. It's the most wonderful and the most radical thing that can ever happen to a human being.

The day that you are adopted through the son. Was your emancipation day. It's freedom day. When you give your life to Christ. And the disciples who abide and remain.

[16:38] Are the ones who know. That they have been set free. Wouldn't everyone want that? Well no.

No everyone wouldn't want that. Particularly if you refused to accept the depth of your need. So Jesus makes his basic point in verses 37 to 38. Where Jesus says to them. He says. Your privilege does not make you as free.

As you think it does. Yes. Ethnically. I know that you are children of Abraham. But you are not acting like free sons.

In fact. Verse 39. You don't look anything like this family. You don't look anything like Abraham. Because the word came to you.

Like it came to Abraham. And I called you to follow me. Just like I called him. And what did you do? Well verse 37. You sought to kill me. And that's not what Abraham did.

[17:42] But my word doesn't remain in you. In fact it has no place in you at all. And then in verse 37 he says. What must be the most offensive thing that Jesus ever says. He says.

A person's action. Flow from a person's origins. A person's actions. Flow from a person's origins. He says. Like father. Like son. And that implies your true paternal origins. That your paternal origins are something radically different to mine.

He's telling them. He's saying. It might be Abraham that's written on your birth certificate. And you're putting an awful lot of confidence in that. Turning down the chance of freedom.

Because you think that you were born into it. But everything I see. As I look at you. Tells another story. It tells the story of another father.

[18:42] That is a basic point. But it is a deeply offensive claim. Jesus is saying to the people of his day.

You are not the children that you think you are. So verses 39 to 44. He lays out the evidence. Which makes him question their paternity so confidently. What makes. A levy a levy.

What makes. A little a little. Or a loft house. A loft house. We all have family traits. Don't we? You can spot a levy child. Long face.

Dark hair. Skinny. That's what makes. A levy child. You'll have that in your family. There'll be family resemblances. Won't there? What makes a child of God. A child of God.

Now there's one killer family trait. Verse 42. Verse 42. If God is your father. You love Jesus Christ. No exceptions.

[19:44] Because the son and the father look the same. In eternity. God the son. Flows.

From the father's very own nature. And here in time. God the son has been sent to us. By the father. In visible flesh and blood.

To storm the walls of the prison. To free us from death. And sin. And self forever. Who wouldn't love that? So the acid test.

Of Abraham's children. God's true children. Is that you love his true son. And when you hear the son speak. Verse 47. You know straight away his voice.

God's true children. Number one. Love the son. Who brings life. And number two. They love the truth. When he speaks. But what does Jesus see. When he looks around.

[20:40] Verse 40. He sees people who hate the son. So much they want to kill him. And verse 43. They hate the truth so much. They cannot bear it. Any more than those prisoners.

Could bear the light in the cave. How dare you say we're slaves. They can't bear it. And they have all the family traits.

Of the devil himself. Just as God the son. Flows out of the father's nature. So a hatred of the truth. And a hatred of life.

Flow out of the devil's own nature. Verse 44. He's been at it right from the beginning. The first words out of his mouth. In Genesis. Are a lie.

About God's truth. And the first thing he did. Was plunge human beings. Into death. Murder. A hatred of life. And a hatred of the truth.

[21 : 37] And here's the most shocking thing of all. Human beings. You and I. By our nature. Are so like him. So like.

That demonic. Spiritual father. That his. Lies. And his. Denial. Have become part. Of our native language. Look at verse 45.

There's one word. In. Verse 45. That is deeply strange. And deeply alarming. It's the word because. It is because.

Jesus. Tells us the truth. That we can't. Bear listening to him. You've got to understand that. If you're going to live today. It's because.

Jesus. Tells the truth. That people can't. Stand listening to him. By nature. We are such strangers. To God. That denial. Comes naturally to us. And we cannot.

[22 : 36] Accept the son. Who is goodness. And truth itself. And so there are many. Many people. In this world. Whose belief. Is as heartfelt. As those. Who are in verse 31.

They believe in Jesus. The JW's. Might knock your door. Tomorrow morning. And they believe in Jesus. But they won't accept him. As fully God.

Sincere liberals. Believe in Jesus. But will not. Accept him. As the one. True light. For all the world. And Jesus says. That belief.

However sincere. Isn't saving. Isn't saving. Belief at all. It's the kind of belief. That the devil. Whispers. In the ears.

Of human beings. Day and night. Believe in Jesus. By all means. But do not worship him. As Lord. Don't love him. So there is the depth.

[23 : 33] Of human need. Even though we don't know it. Even though we are prisoners down here. And blind. We really do need to be set free. By a true son. In some ways.

It's such a gloomy message. Isn't it? But I wonder. Whether hidden. In the seeming hopelessness. As the chapter closes. You notice. The remarkable goodness. And kindness.

And strength. We get to see. In the way that Jesus responds. To those people. His argument. Has been devastating. And all they can do. Verse 48. Is respond. By hurling insults.

At him. First. A racist slur. And then a blasphemous one. There are some words. Out there. That are truly shocking. And so talk to the school children here.

About when someone uses. The N word. In school. And even in a playground. Where kids have heard it all. That word. Still has the power to shock.

[24 : 36] Doesn't it? Truly shock. People don't put up. With it rightly. And verse 48. Is on that scale. First they throw the S word.

At Jesus. The Samaritan word. Presumably. Because he's been questioning. Their legitimacy. The Jews and the Samaritans. They both claim to be. Legitimate children of God. And even worse. They then throw. The D word at him. They respond to the truth himself. The grace of heaven himself. And they call him a demoniac. Demonic.

But I do think. In verses 48 to 59. We get to see the height. Of Jesus grace. Secondly. The height of Jesus grace. Even though you insult him.

John is saying. There really is still time. To rejoice. In the eternal son. Even now. Even. When you're as lost.

[25 : 38] As they are lost. If you will abandon your lies. And embrace the son with joy. And confess it all to him. And find a place to belong.

Do you see how incredibly kind. And measured. Jesus is to these terrible slurs. I'm simply speaking the truth. Verse 49. I'm honouring what my father has given me to say.

And you dishonour me. But I don't seek my own glory. Verse 50. And here is why Jesus doesn't need to punch back. When they spit at Jesus.

They spit at the father himself. And the father will one day. Judge all things. Including everyone. Who dishonours his boy. And so Jesus can leave his own glory.

And his own honour to the judge. And instead in verse 51. Even now under these terrible slurs. Even now he reaches out again. And he says truly. Truly. Truly.

[26 : 40] Really. Deeply. He says urgently. Listen to me. And he says if anyone. Keeps my word. And follows my life.

Even. Even you now. You'll never see death. And he can be truly free. And that is remarkable.

Which one of us would answer back like that. And he still does that tonight. Goes for the most hard hearted. Insulter of Jesus you've ever met.

The ones who maybe sit there. And think they're already Christians. Do you realise tonight. It's not too late. To abandon. The prism of lies. Take.

Take my hand. Jesus says. And live forever. Forever. But the response is to laugh.

[27 : 42] No human being can free us from death. Who do you think you are? Claiming to give a kind of freedom. That even Abraham and the prophets never knew.

Who do you make yourself out to be? And once again. The reply from Jesus. Can you see it? Is patient and restrained. Beyond belief. He's told them who he is repeatedly. And it's as if he says. Now I don't need to answer that.

The father who you claim to love and worship. He will glorify me one day. He will show you who I am. And maybe when I'm lifted up to die. And enthroned on a cross. Maybe then you will see it.

If you knew him like I knew him. You would see that glory right now. And so here then is how you know. Someone has been set free from sin and death.

And the devil. And belong to Jesus. You know it because you can see them. Rejoicing in him. What makes you.

[28 : 43] A true spiritual child of Abraham. Abraham was a man who lived a long hard life. He gave up his home. He gave up his land. He gave up his father's house.

He got a lot of things wrong. But he was marked according to Jesus. By one thing. And that was the joy that he gained.

From a long way off. Through all the shadows. And promises. From a distance. Abraham saw the son of God. He saw the lamb that God would provide.

To ransom his own. And Abraham believed God. And it was credited to him righteousness. In other words. Abraham was freely forgiven. Abraham saw God the son.

And he rejoiced. And because God is not the God of the dead. But the God of the living. Abraham is still seeing. And rejoicing. In Jesus Christ.

[29 : 40] Even as Jesus spoke these words. And all that. Sounds utterly laughable to them. Come on Jesus. Everyone knows.

Abraham was a hero back in the Old Testament. There's no Jesus in the Old Testament. It sounds laughable doesn't it. To say Abraham saw Jesus. But if you know truly who Jesus is.

Then suddenly. Then suddenly. It is their words. That are laughable. It is their words. That seem like a joke. They look into the face.

Of the ancient of days. And they say to him. You're not yet 50 years old. How did you see Abraham? It's ridiculous.

But remember. It's always that way. When people laugh at Jesus. Remember that this week. Remember that.

[30 : 37] When they seem so confident. And self-assured. And Jesus claims. Seems so laughable. But they are laughing. From inside a prison cell. A prison cell.

Which they cannot even see the walls anymore. Truly. Truly. I saw you before Abraham ever was. I am.

I am the eternal son. Who spoke to Moses from the burning bush. Who led Israel. Behind that burning light. And gave joy unspeakable. To your father Abraham. And that same eternal son.

Is the one who spoke that day. And who speaks tonight. Who do you make yourself out to be Jesus. I am who I am. And even now.

It is not too late. To rejoice in me. Just like your father Abraham did. But no they won't. They pick up stones.

[31 : 35] Because what Jesus has said. Is so utterly clear. That they cannot bear it. He's claiming. Without a shadow of doubt. To be of one nature. With the eternal God. And it's so blindingly truthful.

That the light burns. Sometimes. As a parent. When you've got a little one. And they're trapped.

In a. Angry mess. And they're screaming. And kicking. And shouting. All you can do. Is hold them tight.

While they fight. And there's something here. There's something of that here. In the way that Jesus deals with these people. He is so strong.

And so kind. And so glorious. All in himself. Jesus doesn't head back. And defend himself. He just. Faithfully. He keeps offering them. A way down.

[32 : 35] A way out. Of that blind. Angry mess. And I think that's incredibly helpful. To keep as a picture in our minds. That when people are lashing out at Jesus.

What is it that they need? They need the son of God. To open their eyes. To help them out of the cave. And we can invite them.

We can read the bible with them. We can bring them to church. But if we aren't praying for them. Then we've clearly not understood. How dark the prison is. And if we are here tonight. This evening. Rejoicing in the son. That can only mean. That he has done something. Absolutely wonderful for us. He has stormed the walls. And has set us free.

From our own web of lies. Otherwise. You and I would be as lost. As everyone else. And there's nothing to be proud of. But he who sets.

[33 : 32] He who the son sets free. Truly is free. Your home. And so when this week. You feel trapped. And guilty.

Or like an imposter. That you don't belong. Come. Come and embrace the son. Over again. And remember who you are. In heaven.

Let's pray.