**Gospel Freedom**

Romans 8:1-2

The book and the movie **UNBROKEN** tell the traumatic and inspiring story of Louis Zamperini. In WW2 Zamperini was a bombardier on a B-24. On a rescue mission in 1943 his plane had mechanical problems and crashed into the Pacific. For ***47 days*** Louis and two other men managed to survive, drifting along - fishing and fighting off sharks. Then they landed on a Japanese controlled island - and the real suffering started.

In multiple POW camps Zamperini was consistently and ***systematically tortured*** - mostly by one particularly sadistic Japanese officer called “The Bird.” Since Louie had been an Olympic runner, the Bird made him race Japanese soldiers and beat up the American whenever he won. For 2 and a half years Zamperini did slave labor, went with very little food, and was almost constantly beaten down by the Bird.

When the war finally ended and Louie found himself free, the trauma of his experiences, and ***the anger from his suffering haunted him***. He had nightmares he could not shake. Even after getting married to a beautiful and supportive wife, Louie could not shake the trauma and started to drink. It got so bad that his wife finally left him, taking their newborn son with her.

But his wife wouldn’t give up on him. She heard about this young preacher named Billy Graham who was in L.A. and invited Louie to come hear the man. For two nights he listened to this southern preacher - feeling guilty and fuming with anger. On the second night when Graham gave the invitation, Louie got up to walk out. But at the aisle he stopped.

Suddenly he was back in the life raft. It hadn’t rained for two days and in desperation he whispered a prayer, ***“If you save me, I will serve you forever.”*** Suddenly, rain began to fall.

There in Billy Graham’s tent, **Louie felt the rain on his face**. And in that moment, he saw all of his experiences differently. When the plane went down, God kept him from drowning. When a Japanese bomber strafed his raft full of holes, God kept him and his friends from getting shot and protected them from the circling sharks. When the Bird had beaten him to the breaking point and time and again he had prayed - God had given him strength to just keep breathing. God had never forsaken Louie Zamperini. God’s love had been with him every step of the way - especially in the darkest times.

Having experienced the grace and forgiveness of God, and the healing power of that grace - Louie forgave all the men who had tortured them. And just like that his nightmares stopped. His anger disappeared. His alcoholism evaporated. A year later he went back to Japan and met with all the guards he could find to tell them he forgave them and tell them how they could be forgiven by God as well. He never found the Bird but later sent a letter to him.

<https://www.guideposts.org/inspiration/miracles/gods-grace/louie-zamperini-the-power-of-forgiveness>

Here is how the author of Unbroken summarized his story:

“In bitterness, Louie was as much a captive as he’d been when barbed wire had surrounded him. This is why forgiveness is so liberating. But how is it found? For Louie, it lay in resurrecting his dignity, seeing himself not as the wretched creature that the Bird had striven to make of him, but as the object of God’s infinite love.” Laura Hillenbrand

Louie Zamperini experienced the joy of being set free from POW camp. And he experienced the joy of being set free from his bitterness and anger. The Allies won the war over Japan, achieving his freedom from his captors. Jesus won the victory over sin - providing his freedom

Here is the truth for everyone here who knows Jesus and belongs to Him by faith: ***you WERE a slave to sin.*** You were destined for death and condemnation. BUT NOW in Christ you are FREE! You are no longer a slave! You are no longer a captive. ***Jesus won the victory!***

Picture Louis Zamperini in the POW camp in Japan. He was a slave. Then picture him as a free man, back in the U.S. What would you think of ***Zamperini flying back to Japan,*** walking back into his old prison cell and chaining himself back to the wall? You would think - that’s crazy! Why in the world would someone who is FREE go back into SLAVERY?

But that is exactly ***what Christians do when we fall back into our old habits of sin.*** The chains of sin have been broken. We are FREE in Christ. But sometimes we use our freedom to serve our old master - sin - instead of our new master - Jesus.

Look with me at Romans 8:1

“There is therefore now ***no condemnation*** for those who are in Christ Jesus.” Romans 8:1

The first word of Romans 8 is a **NEGATION**. In Yoda speak, “No condemnation there is therefore now.” Based on Romans 1-7 and the joyful truth of JUSTIFICATION God has emphatically assured us - NO CONDEMNATION awaits us!

***Who is the us?*** Here is that beautiful Pauline phrase: “those **IN CHRIST JESUS**.” As followers of Jesus we are not just with him, we are IN HIM - we are UNITED with Him, so we belong to Him.

So what we will see in these first two verses of Romans 8 are **Three Freedoms** we have in Christ. The first one leaps off the page - we are free from judgment and the fear of condemnation.

**In Christ, you are…**

1. Free from **Judgment**

“There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.” Rom. 8:1

Think about that word - **CONDEMNATION**. When an ***accused person stands before the judge***, at the end of the trial, after all evidence has been presented and all arguments have been heard the judge weighs it all out and delivers a verdict. In our courts the options are guilty or not guilty. Human courts don’t ever claim to pronounce someone innocent. They simply seek to determine if the specific charges brought in that case can be proven beyond reasonable doubt.

In God’s court, we deal with the ***OMNISCIENT ONE*** - the all-seeing God who knows not only our every action but also our every intention, our inmost thoughts and desires. Listen to this verse in 1 Chronicles - King David speaking to his son, Solomon.

* God guarantees perfect **Justice**

“The Lord searches all hearts and understands every plan and thought.” 1 Chronicles 28:9

This is ***a powerfully sobering reality.*** The holy God of heaven sees directly into our hearts and understands our every plan and thought. Oh, if only Solomon had listened to this warning and followed his father’s counsel! Know God and serve him with your whole heart! Love him, as the Law of Moses commands, with all of your heart, soul, mind and strength!

* God guarantees perfect **Justice**

“Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man. For God will bring every deed into judgment, with every secret thing, whether good or evil.” Ecclesiastes 12:13-14

Those are the last words of the book and the last words of King Solomon. And that promise of justice is not just an Old Testament teaching. Listen to the Lord Jesus, warning specifically about the hypocrisy of the Jewish religious leaders:

***Jesus is the APPOINTED JUDGE of all people.*** Every person on earth will one day stand before King Jesus and be judged. All they have done and said and thought will be projected onto the big screen in the courtroom of God’s final justice. Revelation 20 describes the scene. And here is the final outcome:

* God guarantees perfect **Justice**

“And the dead were judged by what was written in the books, according to what they had done.” Revelation 20:12

***God keeps meticulous records.*** He doesn’t miss a single thought, a single motive. It is all written down and held in books in heaven. And every person will answer for everything they have done.

UNLESS.

***There is one escape clause.*** One way out. And His name is Jesus! Come back to the Good News in Romans 8:1.

**In Christ, you are…**

1. Free from **Judgment**
	* A new Position: forgiven and **Justified**

“There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.” Rom. 8:1

Think of the coming ***judgment as a volcano erupting***, raining down fire and ash. Jesus has a **gigantic titanium UMBRELLA**. If you are holding on to Jesus, you have a NEW POSITION - you are under that umbrella of protection and the flaming fire of judgment will not fall on you. But if you are not with Jesus - if you are not IN CHRIST - then you will be totally exposed to that soul-consuming, ultimately terrifying, weeping and gnashing of teeth condemnation.

The key phrase is there: IN CHRIST JESUS.

**In Christ, you are…**

1. Free from **Judgment**
	* A new Position: forgiven and **Justified**

“In order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us…” Rom. 8:4

***Are you in Christ?*** Have you fallen on your face before King Jesus, pledging your heart and life to Him? Then you are not longer IN SIN - now you are IN CHRIST. You have a totally new position! Before you were GUILTY, now you are FORGIVEN. More than that, in Christ you are RIGHTEOUS - justified. Verse 3-4 say that instead of condemning us for our sin God the Father condemned sin in the flesh of His Son IN ORDER THAT the requirement of the law would be fulfilled in us.

***This is what it means to be JUSTIFIED***. When God looks at you - if you belong to Jesus by faith - then He does not see your sin anymore, He sees the righteousness of Christ. Only Jesus perfectly fulfilled the Law of God - but when God looks at you, He sees the performance of Jesus and gives you credit for that righteousness!

The wrath that should have fallen on you fell instead on Jesus, the Lamb of God - the once for all sacrifice for your sin and mine. His human flesh was consumed in that fiery outpouring of wrath - consumed to the point of physical death on the cross.

And so you and I are FREE! ***Your books, detailing all of your sins*** - past, present and future - were nailed to the cross with Jesus and **they BURNED UP THERE** as his flesh was condemned. So those books cannot be pulled out again to be used against you! Those crimes have already been prosecuted. There is no divine double jeopardy. Once sins have been paid for, once the sentence of condemnation has been carried out, those sins cannot be presented again in the divine court of justice. Hallelujah! We are FREE from judgment and condemnation! And that’s just the first freedom we have in Christ. Here is the second Gospel gift we have in Christ.

**In Christ, you are…**

1. Free from **Sin**

 “For the law of the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death.” Romans 8:2

Again we see that beautiful phrase, ***“IN CHRIST.”*** Not only are we free from judgment in Christ, we are also free from the law of sin and its corresponding law of death. First let’s consider what it means to be free from sin and then we will conclude today celebrating our freedom from the fear of death!

Before you trusted in Jesus to save you, ***you were under the LAW OF SIN***. Sin was the controlling power in your life. Ephesians 2 says:

“And you were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked… we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind.” Ephesians 2:1-3

Don’t miss that first descriptor! Those who live in the passions of the flesh, who “follow their hearts” and “believe in themselves” are **DEAD in their sins**. Apart from Jesus this is the natural, default spiritual condition of all people - “like the rest of mankind.” Anyone who is outside of the protection of Jesus is under the controlling power of SIN. They belong to their sinful desires. Sin is their master. They are bound to obey its LAW.

We know from James 1 and 4 that ***sin comes from our own desires*** that are at war within us. We can’t blame God. We can’t even blame the devil - though he certainly does his best to deceive and trip us up. Ultimately each of us is to blame for the sinful desires that grow in our own hearts and that we feed until they mature into sinful actions. As people reject God and choose their own sinful desires, God releases them into the consequences of their sin. **You reap what you sow**. Sow to the sinful nature, reap more of the sinful nature. Its control over you gets stronger.

**Sin is like FIRE**. The more you feed it, the stronger it gets and the more it consumes. And it is never satisfied. Left unchecked, sin will devour your entire life. As James says, “Sin, when it is full grown, gives birth to death.”

The Law of sin and death are one and the same. The controlling power of sin always leads to death.

Some of you know that I serve on a national board with our denomination, the EFCA. It’s for the Network of all EFCA leaders - pastors, missionaries, chaplains, ministry leaders. In 2014 we got to speak with **a pastor’s wife I will call Barbara**. Barbara had been married to a pastor I’ll call Ken for over 20 years. They raised two kids together. They served in youth ministry for 14 years, then Ken took over as lead pastor of an E Free Church in the midwest in 2001. By all appearances, Ken was happy and holy - a role model of a pastor, husband and father.

But at a District Conference one year - a gathering of a couple hundred pastors - Ken made a small compromise by choosing to room alone in a hotel. Nobody binked an eye - seasoned pastor, wanting some alone time - who wants to deal with another pastor who 9 times out of 10 snores like a chainsaw? But that small opening for temptation reactivated some old struggles he had had with pornography.

***That small seed of temptation and sin grew***, digging down roots in his heart and life. He didn’t seek help. He didn’t share with a fellow pastor. He didn’t share with his wife or anyone at his church. He figured he could handle it. It wasn’t that big a deal.

But sin, remember, is a fire. If you don’t douse it quickly and decisively, it grows and spreads. Dabbling in porn eventually turned into a full addiction. And the next year at that same annual conference of pastors he took his sin to a new level by hiring some live company.

This went on for two more years. A small struggle with porn ***turned into an all consuming addiction***. And nobody knew. Nobody saw the signs. Barbara looked back and said there were signs, like the staying alone at the hotel, but Ken had explanations ready.

And then one day he left. The guilt and shame of his sin - the power of the addiction - overwhelmed him. He answered his cell phone one last time at a gas station. Barbara begged him to come home. She said, “I don’t care what you’ve done. I don’t care what’s going on. Just please come home!” But Ken felt he had gone too far. He felt like there was no coming back from the places he had been.

He drove off into the woods and they eventually found his car and his body.

***I’ve seen the power of sin.*** We’ve all felt the effects - the pull of this whirlpool as sin is conceived by our own desires and it begins to grow, dragging us down in its destructive current. But that should not be the USUAL EXPERIENCE for a follower of Jesus! Our Lord and Savior rescued us from the controlling power of sin!

**In Christ, you are…**

1. Free from **Sin**

 “For the law of the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death.” Romans 8:2

There is ***a NEW LAW*** that operates in your life, since the moment you were born again by faith - the LAW OF THE SPIRIT OF LIFE. When the Spirit of Jesus moved into your heart, the power of sin over you was broken. Imagine Jesus breathing His Spirit into your heart, just as He breathed life into Adam’s nostrils and he came to life in the first place. When you were born again Jesus filled you with His life, with His Spirit. And where the Spirit of God lives, sin cannot reign.

“The law of the Spirit of life HAS SET YOU FREE in CHRIST.” Hear the truth, child of God - **in Christ you are FREE**. Sin was your master, but Jesus is your Master now.

**In Christ, you are…**

1. Free from **Sin**
	* A new Power: the **Holy Spirit** now reigns in you

 “For the law of the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death.” Romans 8:2

Sin was the controlling power in your life, **but now the Holy Spirit** is the controlling power in your life. Sin owned you, now Jesus owns you. You WERE dead in SIN. Now you are alive in Christ. You were locked in a cell, chained to the wall, blind and dead - bound to your own sinful desires. But Jesus walked into that cell, shattered those chains, threw down those walls, picked you up - breathed life into your new spiritual lungs - and carried you out of that cell into HIS KINGDOM - a place of freedom, life and peace!

So whenever a Christian wanders back into old patterns of sin, ***he is chaining himself back up to broken shackles***; he is closing a gate upon himself that has already been thrown down. He is obeying a master who no longer has any authority over him. But that old master - called your FLESH - will shout and yell and fuss at you, trying to convince you that he is still in charge. He will whisper and manipulate, he will lie and use every trick in the book to deceive you.

So the key for us is to HOLD ONTO THE TRUTH that we see here in verse 2. “In Christ you are FREE.” ***Don’t believe the lie that you CAN’T.*** As a Christian, in the power of the Holy Spirit, ALL THINGS ARE POSSIBLE.

* ***You can’t break that habit.*** It’s a lie! By the power of the Holy Spirit you can break any habit and create a whole new set of habits!
* ***You can’t forgive that person***. It’s a lie! The law of the Spirit of life will enable you to forgive, to let go, to release that debt as the Lord released all of your debts against Him!
* ***You can’t handle the pain.*** It’s a lie! God’s grace is sufficient for everything we must endure - whatever illness, whatever sadness, whatever loss - in the light of the cross and in the light of eternity, we ALWAYS have hope; we can always hold on a little longer!
* ***You can’t reach anyone with the gospel.*** It’s a lie! The Holy Spirit has promised to give us the words to say if we just ask Him for help. We all have different personalities and approaches to outreach - but all of us can reach people as we pray for them, listen to them, hear their story and share our story.

Yoda said, “Do or do not. There is no try.” That’s good wisdom for Jedi. The Christian slogan should be ***“Just do it. There is no CAN’T.”***

In your flesh you can’t. **Your old, sinful self couldn’t**. Romans 8 says, “Those who are in the flesh CANNOT please God.” But then it immediately goes on - “You however are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if in fact the Spirit of God dwells in you!”

So as we seek to encourage one another, that’s the question when we take on struggles of different kinds: ***“Do you have the Holy Spirit or not?”*** If you do - then all things are possible. If you don’t, then it’s time to cry out to Jesus to forgive you, to come into your life, to become your Savior and Lord and give you the gift of His Holy Spirit. Because without him, you can do nothing. But as you learn to walk with the Lord - to rest in Him, to trust in Him, to obey His leading - **NOTHING is impossible**. “The Law of the Spirit of life,” is the governing principle of your life. It has replaced the “law of sin and death.”

This is the wonderful reality of life IN CHRIST. Since the moment you were united with Jesus by faith you were set free from judgment and set free from the law of sin. One more freedom: because you are free from sin, you are also free from sin’s guaranteed outcome:

**In Christ, you are…**

1. Free from **Death**

 “For the law of the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death.” Romans 8:2

For those who are IN SIN, their destiny is DEATH. Romans 6 says, ***“the wages of sin is death.”*** Physical death is the final proof that someone was a sinner. Why do people die? Because they have sinned.

Before **Adam and Eve** sinned, there was no death. After they sinned, death entered every part of our world. The wages of their sin was not just death for them - it was death and disease and decay in all living things.

The LAW OF SIN and DEATH are one and the same. In 1 Corinthians 15 Paul describes ***Death as the last enemy to be defeated by Jesus***. Imagine Death as the Grim Reaper with his black cloak and razor sharp sickle. That weapon in the hands of Death is SIN. Why does Death have a rightful claim on people? Because they SIN. Those who sin belong to Death.

In Greek mythology ***HADES*** was the deity who ruled the underworld and that is the one inescapable realm. Those who descend into the realm of Hades cannot escape. There is no hope for them.

Until Jesus. He is the only One who walked into Death’s domain - conquered that unassailable enemy - and walked back out again.

***How did Jesus defeat Death?*** By living a sinless life! Death and Hades could not hold onto Jesus because He had done nothing wrong and had done everything right. Jesus had fulfilled all righteousness, so Death had no case against Him. Jesus was free to go, with no valid charges on his record. So on that Sunday morning 2,000 years ago, Jesus walked out of the tomb.

This is what Aslan explained in Narnia as ***DEEPER MAGIC.*** Yes, the Deep Magic required a death - so when Edmond betrayed his brother and sisters, he belonged to the white witch. She had a claim on his life. But Aslan knew of a Deeper Magic - that if a Righteous One, who had never sinned, was killed in the place of the traitor, the Stone Table would be broken and the sinner would be set free.

**That Stone Table represents JUSTICE**. You and I - like Edmond - deserve to die. We have all betrayed other people and ultimately we have betrayed Jesus, the One True King. As traitors to the crown, we deserve to be tied to that stone table of justice and executed. It is the LAW of SIN AND DEATH. The Deep Magic of God’s Kingdom requires that treachery be punished with death.

***But if a willing SUBSTITUTE should offer Himself*** - a Righteous One who according to Justice did not deserve to die - then the Stone Table you should die on - the one I should die on - would crack and be broken forever. Justice has been satisfied! The price has been paid! Jesus, our Great Emperor beyond the Sea, laid down His life for you and for me - the righteous one for the unrighteous ones. Since He paid the price for our sin - since sin was condemned in the flesh of Jesus - there is NO CONDEMNATION waiting for us. Since Jesus placed himself IN SIN - you and I are now FREE from sin. We are in a new position before God - no longer dead in sin, but now alive in Christ. No longer guilty, but now forgiven and RIGHTEOUS. We are free from judgment, free from the controlling power of sin, and free from the eternal destiny of death.

**In Christ, you are…**

1. Free from **Death**
	* A New Promise: filled with the **Life** of God forever

 “For the law of the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death.” Romans 8:2

We not only have a new position and new power - we also have **a new PROMISE** - of life in Christ now and forevermore! The law governing us is the Law of the Spirit of LIFE. The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy - that is the devil’s agenda- the fierce accuser and deceiver of all people. But Jesus came to give us life - life abundant, and overflowing!

**In Christ, you are…**

1. Free from **Death**
	* A New Promise: filled with the **Life** of God forever

 “He who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies…” Rom. 8:11

The God of RESURRECTION is ***the LIFE-GIVING GOD!*** He gave you the Holy Spirit at the moment you were forgiven and united with Jesus by faith. Your body became a temple of the Spirit, where God Himself will dwell forever. And where God lives, there is life!

Picture a huge barren desert - sand and sun as far as the eye can see. Rocks and old bones poking through on hilltops exposed to the wind. ***It’s Tatooine***, if you remember R2 and 3PO when their escape pod first crashed on that desolate planet.

That is a picture of life apart from God - for those in sin, they live a parched, dry, lifeless existence and are destined for death.

But for those who call on Jesus in faith, **a spring suddenly appears in the desert**. A pond begins to form around that spring - and where the water of that pond touches, life begins to emerge. Slowly at first but increasingly over time, the life-giving water of the Spirit heals brokenness, releases you from the chains of sin, replaces the enslaving deeds of darkness with the liberty and generosity of the Spirit of Life.

This is the promise for all who belong to Jesus! Life! Now and forever!

Let’s pray!