

FREE INDEED

Ezekiel 2:1-5

He said to me, “Son of man, stand up on your feet and I will speak to you.” As he spoke, the Spirit came into me and raised me to my feet, and I heard him speaking to me. He said: “Son of man, I am sending you to the Israelites, to a rebellious nation that has rebelled against me; they and their ancestors have been in revolt against me to this very day. The people to whom I am sending you are obstinate and stubborn. Say to them, ‘This is what the Sovereign LORD says.’ And whether they listen or fail to listen—for they are a rebellious people—they will know that a prophet has been among them.

Psalm 2

¹ Why do the nations conspire^[a]
and the peoples plot in vain?
² The kings of the earth rise up
and the rulers band together
against the LORD and against his
anointed, saying,
³ “Let us break their chains
and throw off their shackles.”
⁴ The One enthroned in heaven laughs;
the Lord scoffs at them.
⁵ He rebukes them in his anger
and terrifies them in his wrath, saying,
⁶ “I have installed my king
on Zion, my holy mountain.”
⁷ I will proclaim the LORD’s decree:
He said to me, “You are my son;
today I have become your father.

⁸ Ask me,
and I will make the nations your
inheritance,
the ends of the earth your
possession.
⁹ You will break them with a rod of iron;
you will dash them to pieces like
pottery.”
¹⁰ Therefore, you kings, be wise;
be warned, you rulers of the earth.
¹¹ Serve the LORD with fear
and celebrate his rule with trembling.
¹² Kiss his son, or he will be angry
and your way will lead to your
destruction,
for his wrath can flare up in a moment.
Blessed are all who take refuge in
him.

MESSAGE:

We Americans prize freedom above almost everything else. America was born in a struggle for freedom. Our most sacred political documents, the *Declaration of Independence* and the *Constitution of the United States*, have become worldwide symbols of mankind’s quest for freedom. Martin Luther King’s famous words still ring in our ears: “*Free at last, free at last, Great God Almighty, I’m free at last!*” Freedom is a national treasure which we jealously guard, which is why hundreds of thousands of American soldiers have shed their blood to protect it on battlefields from Gettysburg to Flanders to Iwo Jima to Saigon.

America is not the only country in the world with a form of government that protects the freedom of its citizens. There are democratic republics in Latin America and Europe and Asia, so we are not unique in that regard. But there is one thing that is unique in our

Constitution and that is its first three words: “*We the people...*” In America, we the people established the government with the conviction that government is ultimately accountable to the people, and not people to the government.

One of the earliest secular governments in history was born in the land of ancient Israel. After the twelve tribes had suffered a humiliating military defeat at the hands of the Philistines, the Israelites went to the prophet Samuel and demanded that he give them a king to rule over all twelve tribes so that they could present a united front against their enemies.

Samuel asked God if He wanted this to happen, and God told Samuel to grant them their wish, but also to warn them that the king they longed for would use his power to gain more and more control over their lives. He would tax them, draft them for military service, conscript them for other forms of labor and keep his eye on them by conducting “censuses.”

In both the *Old Testament* and the *New Testament* we are warned that it is the nature of human government to seek to replace God as the object of man’s worship. The Psalmist wrote: “The kings of the earth and the rulers take their stand against the Lord and against His Anointed One, saying: ‘Let us break their chains and cast off their fetters.’” (Psalm 2)

In the *Book of Revelation* God warns the Apostle John that Satan inflames the hearts of those who govern to make war against the saints. And as history shows, governments from the ancient Greeks and Romans, to the Ottoman Turks, to the German Third Reich, to Stalinist Russia, and Communist China, have all fulfilled this prophecy by seeking to suppress the voice of God. This is something that we Christians need to keep firmly in mind nowadays.

Some of our most cherished freedoms—the rights of free speech and the free exercise of religion—are gradually being eroded by the intrusion of government. It will require vigilance and courage to ensure that this doesn’t continue. But as important as our political freedoms are, there is an even more important kind of freedom, and that is spiritual freedom—the freedom people have through the forgiveness of their sins in Jesus Christ. We must always remember that while we were born politically free, we were born as spiritual slaves.

St. Paul reminds us again and again in his letters that we entered this world as slaves to sin. King David wrote: “*Surely I was sinful from birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me.*” Jesus said, “Any man who sins is a slave to sin.” Spiritually speaking, we were like Lazarus who lay dead in his tomb, unable to lift a finger to help himself until Jesus came and spoke three words—“Lazarus, come forth!”—whereupon the dead man was raised to new life. Only the Word of God can raise spiritually dead people to new life. So just as we must remain vigilant to safeguard our political freedoms, we must also remain vigilant in regard to our spiritual freedom, because we have an enemy by the name of Satan who is constantly trying to lure us away from the freedom we have in Christ.

Remember that the Israelites Moses led out of slavery in Egypt sat around campfires in the wilderness longing to abandon their newfound freedom and return to their old slavery. In the same way, as strange as it may seem, we too have an inclination to enslave ourselves again to the sin from which Christ has set us free. Knowing this, God gave us two tools we need to employ if we are to remain free: *eyes to see and ears to hear the truth of His Word*. *“If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples. Then you will know the truth and the truth will set you free.”*

When a person is imprisoned in unbelief, he wanders from darkness to darkness; he moves about in what the English poet John Milton called “...*darkness visible*.” But when he is blessed with freedom in Christ, God gives him the eyes of faith so that he can receive light from God’s Word which will serve as a *“lamp unto his feet.”*

Working through the Word of God, the Holy Spirit reveals the truth to us and keeps us headed in the right direction. But always remember that the truth that sets us free comes only from God. This is a crucial point because the prevailing opinion of the world is that the truth is something that lies *within* us. Far from it.

When we search within ourselves, it’s not the truth we find, but the sin which has infected us ever since we were conceived. Or to put it another way: what we find is our voracious, insatiable SELVES, who, like government, demand that we worship them, rather than God. If government is the enemy without, our “selves” are the enemy within, because the allure of self-worship is very powerful. It is a relentless temptation to everyone who inhabits this fallen world—including Christians. The evidence for this is all around us. Counselors, therapists and self-improvement gurus expound upon the value of having a healthy self-image and of developing self-esteem. Entire industries pander to self-enhancement with products like botox and silicon and medical procedures from small tucks to extreme makeovers—all of them promising to improve on the way God designed you.

This appeal of self-worship is apparent in the economics of the marketplace: the most profitable department in a department store is the cosmetics department. Plastic surgeons make ten times as much money as family physicians. Personally, I’m convinced that the reason most people exercise is to improve their looks rather than their health. But when all is said and done, what is this “self” we are encouraged to worship? Isn’t it really the Old Adam—the flesh, as Paul appropriately called it—which is enslaved to this world and to the prince of this world?

The prince of this world is a consummate master at convincing us that we are serving our own best interests when we indulge and pamper our “selves.” Our secular society throbs with the drumbeat of me, me, me. Self-worth, self-interest, self-reliance, self-love, self-actualization. *“Learning to love yourself is the greatest love of all.”* Self-worship.

In the process it’s easy to forget that this insatiable self of ours is and always will be a prisoner of this world and of its prince. When we join this orgy of self-absorption we are really offering ourselves up again as slaves to the very thing from which Jesus has set us free. This is what Paul meant when he wrote: *“Do you not know that when you present*

yourself to someone as slaves for obedience, you are slaves of the one you obey?" When you regard someone or something as your master, it becomes your master.

Was this what Christ gave up his life to accomplish? Did he die a death of unspeakable agony so that you and I could offer ourselves up as slaves to Calvin Klein? Have we forgotten that in Christ our Old Adam was crucified—that his dominion over us was broken? Shall we enslave ourselves to him again of our own free will? We don't have to! Paul continues: *"We know that our old self was nailed with Him to the cross to render our sinful body powerless in order that we might not be slaves to sin any longer."* Do you realize what a precious gift this is? That the power of your Old Adam—your "self"—has been broken? He can tempt you, but he cannot control you—unless you agree to let him.

You have been freed from that slavery and are empowered to live a life in the glorious liberty of the children of God—a people whose citizenship is in heaven! Yes, we are truly free—in the most meaningful sense that the word can have for us: we have the freedom to live for Christ and for our fellow man—instead of for our SELVES.

Daily we can drown the Old Adam in prayer and God's Word and go forth as new men and women with clean hearts and upright spirits. Raised from the dead, we can offer ourselves to God as "weapons of righteousness" to be wielded in His service. We who were servants of sin, can be ambassadors of God's love and mercy.

As Luther once wrote, we can walk among our good deeds as in a paradise of God! Each day we can make a trip to Golgotha and crucify our old selves through repentance so that we can return with new life in Christ. This is what "living under the cross" means: looking to Christ alone for our freedom and to God alone for our fruit. This is the life abundant that God wishes us to have, and whoever is willing to deny himSELF and take up his cross can have it.

In the eyes of the world, the cross was an instrument of torture and death. But Christ turned it into an instrument of life and freedom. And He offers it to every believer as the only means of freeing themselves from the slavery of self-worship.

If you invest your time and energy in loving other people in truth and action, you won't have much of either left to spend on yourself. And you will be free indeed! So in honor of Independence Day let us treasure and guard our political freedoms to be sure. But let us also treasure and guard our Christian freedom.

Our political freedom is a gift from our founding fathers who were determined that we not remain subject to a king. Our Christian freedom is a gift of God, who was determined that we not remain subject to the prince of this world.

Our political freedom was purchased by the blood of patriots. Our spiritual freedom was purchased by the blood of Christ. Our political freedom gives us richer lives in this world. Our spiritual freedom gives us eternal life in heaven.

Amen.