

*A Broken Christmas: Breaking the Chains*  
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*Isaiah 42:1-7; Luke 1:67-79; Luke 4:14-21*

Our final Scripture reading is Luke 4:14-21. May God bless the reading of His holy and sacred Word. “Jesus returned to Galilee in the power of the Spirit, and news about him spread through the whole countryside. He taught in their synagogues, and everyone praised him. He went to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, and on the Sabbath day he went into the synagogue, as was his custom. And he stood up to read. The scroll of the prophet Isaiah was handed to him. Unrolling it, he found the place where it is written: "The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." Then he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant and sat down. The eyes of everyone in the synagogue were fastened on him, and he began by saying to them, "Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing."”

I have never been to a jail. Never been on either side of the bars. I've tried. I had a friend in a penitentiary in Indiana. He was allowed 12 visitors and one clergyman on his visitation list. Family members would have to come off the list for me to visit. Turns out you can't send inmates greeting cards or colored paper in Indiana for fear it might conceal narcotics. We all have our own feelings about the justice system, and my friend, for his part, deserved some jail time for his crime. But no matter why you're there, being a prisoner is a hard, hard thing.

I bring this up to get us thinking about today's sermon topic: Breaking the Chains. When I think of the baby Jesus in the manger, I don't think about prisoners or captives. Yet Scripture does. Think of what we heard John the Baptist's father Zechariah say: by the forgiveness of their sins the rising sun will shine on those living in darkness and in the shadow of death. God's horn of salvation will rescue us from our enemies and all who hate us.

The Israelites had been looking for freedom forever. Israel's history is lined with exile, captivity, and oppression. The key event in Israel's history was their release from captivity in Egypt. Jewish festivals point back to God as the hero of the Exodus, the One that set His people free from slavery. From that point on, God's people fall into disobedience and sin, then wind up oppressed by somebody else. They call out to God, and He rescues them.

That's the story of the judges and kings of Israel, who tried to keep out foreign invaders. Ultimately they failed; the northern kingdom of Israel was destroyed in 722 AD, and the southern kingdom went into captivity in Babylon in 586 BC. They are sent home by another conqueror only to find oppression from their neighbors. Finally, they are conquered by the Roman Empire.

Enslavement, imprisonment, captivity and bondage – all part of the story of the Hebrews. And when we hear about those living in darkness, we take it as a metaphor. There's a literal meaning in the ancient world. The world without light was the prison, the dungeon. Roman prisons were built under the streets. Imagine living in an unfinished basement without electricity or heating or cooling, and you start to get the picture. They were dark, damp, dirty places.

It was unusual for someone to stay in that kind of prison very long because they were used to pressure people – political prisoners into changing their views, debtors into getting their family and friends to put together the money. Your family had to provide you with everything – your food, your clothes. If you didn't have family in the area, you were as good as dead. Even then, that still might be the case, as the bad conditions led to disease.

They didn't bother putting dangerous criminals into prison; the Romans just executed them. Prison was a nightmarish place used to punish, to pressure, and to make an example. Paul, when he was awaiting trial in Rome for his beliefs, was placed under house arrest – even the Romans knew he didn't deserve the conditions of the standard jail (though he would spend quite a bit of time there too, eventually.)

To be in the darkness was to be imprisoned by someone who had the power to keep you there. Darkness was not first a metaphor; it was that sense of being trapped. In a world without light pollution like we have today, the night was dark, but not like it is now. But being held captive – now that was darkness. They understood the metaphor of spiritual darkness because they grasped the dark dungeon where the criminal without hope would stay.

And that's what Jesus came to do – to set captives free. When He read from Isaiah and said, “This word has been fulfilled in your hearing,” it was a promise of freedom for the prisoners and the oppressed. Many people took this to be literal, and they thought it meant that Jesus would overthrow Rome and establish God's Kingdom – a Jewish Kingdom – on earth.

God sets prisoners and captives and slaves free in a literal way throughout history. But Jesus came to do something even bigger than that. He came to give us freedom from our sin, the thing that ties us down spiritually, that binds us and causes us to do what we know isn't right. The Pharisees were like, “Why do we need freedom from sin? We have the Law and we keep it to the letter.” But Jesus told them many times, particularly in the Sermon on the Mount, that while they kept the letter of the Law, they broke its spirit.

In Isaiah 58, God tells the Israelites that their fasts are meaningless. God said, in paraphrase, “They seem eager to know me. They ask why I don't see them when they fast and humble themselves and seek me out. But when you fast (God says to them), you exploit your workers. You do as you please. You get angry and fight. Fast from those things, and you'll find me. My fast is for you to break the chains of wickedness, to set the oppressed free, and tear off every yoke of burden, to share your bread, to take care of the poor, to clothe them.” Jesus came to release us from sin so we could love God and love one another this way.

Listen to how the New Testament describes what Jesus did for us on the cross in terms of freedom. It's all over the place. John 8:34-36 - “Jesus replied to the Pharisees, “Very truly I tell you, everyone who sins is a slave to sin. Now a slave has no permanent place in the family, but a son belongs to it forever. So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed.”” Ephesians 3:12 - “In Jesus and through faith in Him we may approach God with freedom and confidence.”

Acts 13:38-39, which we were just studying - “Therefore, my friends, I want you to know that through Jesus the forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you. Through him everyone who believes is set free from every sin, a justification you were not able to obtain under the law of Moses.” Romans 8:1-2 - “Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, because through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit who gives life has set you free from the law of sin and death.” Romans 6:22 - “But now that you have been set free from sin and have become slaves of God, the benefit you reap leads to holiness, and the result is eternal life.”

We have some responsibilities too, but they are in light of that freedom that Jesus brings to us. Galatians 5:13-14 - “You, my brothers and sisters, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the flesh; rather, serve one another humbly in love.” Galatians 5:1 - “It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery.” 1 Peter 2:16 - “Live as free people, but do not use your freedom as a cover-up for evil.” These are just some of the many Scriptures that talk about the freedom we have in Christ. Freedom is core to Jesus' birth and life and death and resurrection. He gave up His freedom as the Son of the Father in order that we might have true freedom and eternal life.

What does all this have to do with Christmas? Christmas signals that change has come. The messiah's arrival brings with it the expectation that freedom from oppression and tyranny and slavery of all sorts has come. The fulfillment comes later during Jesus' life and death – but Jesus' birth is God making good on His promises.

You might hear about a movie that's coming soon. You might hear about the making of the film on the news. You might see interviews with its stars. You might even watch the trailer. But the tickets themselves only go on sale a few days in advance. When they start selling tickets, you know the movie is ready and the only wait left is seeing it for yourself.

In the same way, Jesus' birth indicates that God is fulfilling all His promises, and it's not in the far distant future...it's here and now; it's begun. The birth of Jesus isn't all that special in and of itself; it was so insignificant that everybody who came had to be told to show up – either by angels or a special star in the sky. And yet to all who really knew who Jesus was, everything was tied up in that little bundle of joy. As we hear in the song *O Little Town of Bethlehem*, “The hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight.” At His birth, those in the know began to expect that God's rescue, His setting the captives free, was about to come.

So what does that mean for us? Far more than we realize. I brought up the jail analogy earlier because that's what we think of when we think of being a prisoner...getting locked up for a crime. We have a hard time relating to prisoners. I do. I tend to think of someone in jail as a bully, someone who hurt someone else and is paying the consequences. Not fair, but true.

Jesus offers forgiveness for everyone who is a literal prisoner too. No matter what you've done, you're not outside of the grace of God. You may never see the outside of those prison walls again, but through faith in Jesus Christ, God can set you free of the prison of yourself and your guilt and shame. No prisoner is without hope in a world that includes Jesus.

Most of us relate on a spiritual level. Freedom in Christ is one of the most missed and misunderstood concepts in Scripture. When we think of freedom, we think of our rights as Americans. Freedom of speech, freedom of religion, freedom of the press, freedom of assembly, freedom of petition, freedom to bear arms...the list goes on. We think because we can do and say what we want, in large part, we are free people.

But as wonderful as those freedoms are, that's not the freedom that Jesus came to give us. Many of us who are Christians aren't living in the kind of freedom God promised us. We don't know what we should be free from. We don't understand what this freedom from sin really means. We haven't really thought about it. Zechariah said that the rescue of the prisoners, their freedom, was for a specific purpose: "to enable us to serve [God] without fear in holiness and righteousness before him all our days." Most modern Christians do not live out this freedom. We are not free to serve God in holiness and righteousness all our days.

Why not? We may have put behind us old sins, major sins, the ones we think of as big. To my knowledge, no one in our congregation is living with someone outside of marriage. To my knowledge, no one is ripping off their employer. To my knowledge, no one is planning to take out their annoying neighbor. We aren't breaking the major laws of our country or any of the things we think of as "big." We might think that means we're just fine, we're free.

But I've seen that's not the case, not as much as I've thought. Jesus offers freedom from things that have enslaved me; I've just never thought I was a slave. But many things chain us down. How many of us has a cell phone on them? Pretty much everyone. Can you shut it off without worrying that you'll miss something? How long can you go without checking in? Do you get angry without it? What if someone doesn't answer your text or your call? How do you feel? We start to realize, "This thing has taken over more of my life than I thought."

What is it that gets you angry if you miss it? What do you *have* to have in your life to make things OK? For some people, it's alcohol, a beer, glass of wine after work. For some, it's binge-watching TV – maybe the Hallmark channel, maybe Netflix. Maybe for you, it's games. For some folks, it's music. Food, sex, hobbies, exercise, clubs, activities, all those different things out on the Internet...now marijuana is legal in Michigan, some people will use that.

Ever since Adam and Eve got out of the garden, we've tried to deaden the pain of God's absence, using something, doing something, even things that are relatively good for us, trying to feel better about life. We get addicted to the rush they give us. We are in chains. We pray, we praise Christ, we say "thank God I'm free," but we're slaves to things that distract us and pull us away from God. And you can know this is the case if, when you're stressed or angry or lonely or tired, your first thought is not, "Let me pray about this" or "let me spend some time in God's Word" but "let me go to my happy place with my phone or my game or my show."

Thankfully, it doesn't mean we're not saved – only that we haven't yet experienced the full freedom Jesus wants for us. There are a few reasons for that. The first one is ignorance – we don't know we're bound. You don't notice a chain until you tug at it and realize you can't leave. You don't realize you're stuck because you've never tried stopping a behavior that pushes you away from God. You might be ignorant of the fact that Christ can free you from that behavior.

The second reason we miss out on freedom is that we've fallen in love with our captor. In 1973, in Stockholm, Sweden, a bank robber took four hostages and held them in a bank vault for six days. Because he'd threatened to kill them but then became friendly, the hostages bonded with him – they were more afraid of being killed by the police than the criminal. That's the origin of the term “Stockholm Syndrome,” where someone who is held against their will winds up helping their kidnapper.

We do the same thing. Even though we're captives, we get little joys, incentives, from the enemy of our souls. We get a little thrill at a notification on our phone. We find pleasure in sneaking that donut or talking trash about our co-workers or taking a peek at a forbidden website. We get just enough pleasure out of it that we wind up siding with the devil rather than our God. The good news is, those bonds can be broken. Our God loves us so much that when we experience His love personally, the petty pleasures we thought were so good start to melt away.

But the last reason we often don't experience freedom is that it requires some effort on our part. As we saw in the prison breaks in the book of Acts, the doors swung upon, angels guided our heroes, but they still had to walk out the door. Sometimes when we are finding freedom in Christ from something that troubles us, we wonder, “Why isn't this happening faster? Why doesn't healing and freedom come more quickly?”

Think with me on the story of the prodigal son. The son spends his inheritance in a faraway country, then has nothing. He figures out that going home, even to be his dad's slave, is better than starving to death. His father loves him; his father has been watching for him; the father will embarrass himself running out to meet the son. The son doesn't save himself or make his father do anything. The only thing he has to do is make the long journey home. There's no way to magically get back to his father's doorstep. Step by step, he makes the trip back.

In the same way, if we've been stuck for a long time in a secret sin or in something addictive, it's not that the chains aren't off our feet...it's just a long way to the prison door. If you have setbacks, if you stumble on the way to the exit, don't take that as a sign that you don't have freedom. You just need to keep walking towards the door.

Friends, when Jesus came, He came to give us freedom – freedom to be able to follow Him, to worship Him, and to serve Him in ways that will bring us joy. That doesn't mean we won't enjoy certain pleasures of the world that God gave to us to use responsibly. But it means that when we experience real freedom, we will have the joy of knowing that there is nothing standing between us and God. No chains, no hindrances, no addictions, no habits, no nothing. We will serve God well because that's where we find our joy.

Are we going to get that all perfect in this life? No. Have I gotten there? Not yet. But I see it. I want it. I strive for it. And it's my prayer that one day, all of us here will experience the wonderful freedom of knowing Christ, knowing His overwhelming love for us, and then following in His ways and giving Him glory both now and always.