

GOD'S CALL

Major themes in the Scriptures

The Holy Spirit (14)

Freedom in the Spirit: what it is

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The Lord willing, today we will consider the subject, “The Holy Spirit”, the fourteenth message, in seeking to appreciate major themes in the Scriptures. A short summary of today’s message:

What is true freedom? Is it the power to do whatever I like? Or is it the power to be what I ought to be and to do what I ought to do? How can we find and nurture freedom in the Spirit in all its glory and meaningfulness?

We will seek the Lord to appreciate more of what this means.

Freedom is something that we treasure and there are many people who suffer from bondage in many forms. Many are struggling because of oppression, of difficult circumstances, and they long for freedom in their context.

But what really is freedom that is truly meaningful, important and worthwhile? What is our understanding of freedom and what is it that we want in freedom?

For many people, they have the concept that freedom is the power to do whatever I like. If I can do whatever I like, then surely I will find meaning in life, I will enjoy life and this is what I want.

But then if we ponder over it, we will realize that if what we like is not good, then it is sin; it is not something that we should seek after. This kind of power in sinful mankind is generally the expression of self-life. We can say it is living by the flesh.

It is a false kind of freedom which in reality is bondage to sin.

The Lord Jesus when He spoke to the Jews, He said to them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who commits sin is the slave of sin..."

If what we want in life is self-centred, is not based on what is truly good and meaningful in the eyes of God, then we are moving in the direction of sin – and that is not freedom, that is bondage: We continue to move in a direction where our hearts are bound by the powers of evil, the pull of the world, the inclinations of the self-life; and we have no true freedom.

True freedom is costly but true freedom is truly free.

Freedom in the Spirit basically is the power to be what I ought to be and the power to do what I ought to do. This is the power to live according to the perfect will of God.

This is a subject of very great importance. If we do not sufficiently appreciate freedom in the Spirit, our lives cannot be truly meaningful now or in eternity.

We may find temporary satisfaction; we may enjoy certain things that we do, but deep in our hearts we will know there is no true freedom that is meaningful.

The apostle Paul put it in this way in **Philippians 4: 13**:

Philippians 4: 13

I can do all things through Him who strengthens me.

I can do all things. That is freedom: the power to do anything that he wants to do, but the qualification is – through Him who strengthens me.

So the implication here is that the apostle Paul was not seeking for the power to do anything that he liked in the physical, fleshly realm. It was the power to do all things that would be pleasing to God: all things that God could be involved in meaningfully.

“I can do all things through Him who strengthens me.” God strengthens us to fulfil His will. God strengthens us in order that we may develop in the right direction; that we may contribute to the lives of others in a manner that will have eternal purpose and meaning.

So we can see that this kind of freedom requires power – not from our natural abilities and independent life – but power from God. The Lord Jesus said: “...**apart from Me you can do nothing**”.

Yes, we can do many things, we think. We can do many things in this world in the direction of the self-life but that is nothing of value in eternity. “**Apart from Me you can do nothing**”: This is something which we may not sufficiently appreciate and we live our lives without very much consciousness of the need to do all things in Him and through Him.

So we see there are two different kinds of freedom.

One is false freedom which seems very attractive. The other is true freedom which may only be experienced at great cost. So what kind of freedom would we want?

That choice is left to us. God has given us the freedom to choose what kind of freedom we want: the false kind or the real kind? And the outcome will be dependent on what we choose.

I want to concentrate on the right kind: true freedom that is in the Spirit. And I want to consider with you a very beautiful picture of such a life of freedom in the Lord.

2 Corinthians 12: 7-10

- 7 Because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, for this reason, to keep me from exalting myself, there was given me a thorn in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to torment me--to keep me from exalting myself!
- 8 Concerning this I implored the Lord three times that it might leave me.
- 9 And He has said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness." Most gladly, therefore, I will rather boast about my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me.
- 10 Therefore I am well content with weaknesses, with insults, with distresses, with persecutions, with difficulties, for Christ's sake; for when I am weak, then I am strong.

When we read this passage, what may sometimes come through to us quite strongly is: it is a messenger of Satan, a thorn in the flesh. Many of us may be quite impressed by this aspect of it: Paul suffered a thorn in the flesh; it was a messenger of Satan to torment him – a very unpleasant picture; difficult, painful, and not desirable. And it may seem that Satan was the victor, that Paul was helpless: Satan was tormenting him.

But if we look at the whole passage, we can see that in reality the focus is God.

It is a relationship between God and Paul. God was seeking to do something meaningful in the life of Paul.

First, we see the apostle Paul says: "Because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations..." Where did the revelations come from? They came from God. God gave the revelations to Paul: God wanted Paul to serve Him, to contribute in His kingdom, so God gave him the revelations.

Then why was the thorn in the flesh tormenting him?

He says: "...for this reason, to keep me from exalting myself, there was given me a thorn in the flesh..." So who was it who gave the thorn in the flesh? It was God: God was the One who, for the reason of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, in seeking to help Paul not to exalt himself, gave him a thorn in the flesh.

So it was God's sovereign wisdom, purpose and power. He allowed the evil one to work in that situation, but He had a purpose: to help Paul develop his life to higher quality so that in the midst of the revelations, the apostle Paul would not exalt himself.

The apostle Paul in going through that difficulty probably felt that this was a hindrance to his ministry. And so he implored the Lord three times that it might leave him.

The apostle Paul was willing to suffer for the Lord and he went through much suffering in that regard. He was also prepared to die for the name of the Lord Jesus. He expressed these things but in this situation, it seemed to him it was not helpful and so he asked the Lord to remove it. So it was a relationship between Paul and the Lord.

And He has said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness." This was the Lord's reply to Paul.

It does not mean that the Lord would never remove the thorn in the flesh but at this point in time, it was important for the apostle Paul to go through it.

And so the Lord said to him, "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness."

Very often in our lives, we say God is gracious, we are grateful to Him but we may not be so conscious what that means.

When the Lord says, "My grace is sufficient for you", how deeply do we appreciate this? Are we conscious that truly, His grace is always sufficient for us no matter what the situation may be?

Do we want His will? Do we want to follow Him? If we do then His grace will always be sufficient for us.

And He goes further to say, "...for power is perfected in weakness." (Some translations have it "My power is perfected in weakness." Whether the word "My" is there or not, the meaning is basically the same in terms of what the Lord wanted to communicate.)

Why did the Lord say "...for power is perfected in weakness."?

The Lord's power is absolute; He is almighty. How can it be perfected?

When the Lord's power is manifested in our lives, it is as much as He wants to manifest. His power cannot be perfected by our weakness in the sense that His power grows bigger the more we are weak.

The meaning basically has to do with the degree to which His power would be seen; would be manifested; would be recognized; would be appreciated in the midst of our weakness.

When we know our weakness, we will appreciate His power. When the one who has sinned much recognizes deeply his sins, he appreciates deeply the forgiveness of God.

But it does not mean that we can appreciate God's goodness only when we have sinned.

The Lord Jesus said that the one who is forgiven much loves much. This is what often happens but it does not always have to be that way.

We can love because it is right to love, because we are grateful to God who is very good even when it is not toward us – He is good to others. We are very grateful to have such a God. Our love for Him, our gratitude to Him can be very deep without our having to have gone astray.

But the problem is that for most people generally, it is easy for us to forget God's goodness.

It is easy for us not to be conscious of God's power when we are strong, when we are capable, when we can do many things.

And it is quite evident that in the Christian world, one of the greatest problems in terms of Christian service is that we are too strong for the Lord to work through us. We do not recognize our own need of Him, our own weakness. And although we say we depend on the Lord, it can be to a very large extent dependence on ourselves and a little bit of dependence on the Lord.

This is something that is important for us to ponder over. Each one of us will need to consider carefully: Are we strong? Are we too strong for the Lord to work in us?

He says: "...for power is perfected in weakness." If we recognize our true weakness, if we recognize our total helplessness, it will open the door for the Lord to manifest Himself in a way which He might not want to do otherwise.

We all acknowledge we are created beings; we are helpless in ourselves: we need God. We acknowledge all this but in daily living, we generally do not live by that.

We do things on our own. We have our own ideas, we follow the people of the world, we follow what others may say is a good thing to do, but we do not sufficiently seek to understand: How does God look at the situation? What is it that is important to Him? How does He want it to be done? If we do not sufficiently move in that direction, we will not be weak enough for God to manifest His power.

Why did God bring the people of Israel out of Egypt in that manner? Could He not just simply take them out? Could He not just simply convince Pharaoh that it was to his advantage to let them go?

But we are told specifically God performed His miracles with a mighty hand, bringing out the people of Israel. Why was that so?

We can look at it from different angles but one of the reasons given to us is that the people might know it is the hand of God. It is not just something natural, something that just happened; and the people of Israel in generations of the future will remember and recognize that God led them out of Egypt.

In our lives, do we sufficiently appreciate what God has done for us, that we need Him in every situation, in every aspect of life? Or do we come to Him only when we are totally helpless?

God's power is perfected in weakness. It shows its quality, its strength, its beauty, its meaningfulness in the context where we acknowledge, we recognize, we appreciate our own weakness.

Here in this context, the apostle Paul is not manifesting moral weakness in the sense that because he had morally failed so the Lord was manifesting His power.

Here the Lord was responding to Paul in his asking for the thorn in the flesh to be removed. He felt very difficult; he felt very weak; he felt that he was being hindered. The Lord says, "No. My power will be perfected in your weakness. **My grace is sufficient for you.**"

And so we see the response of Paul. It is a very beautiful response:

Most gladly, therefore, I will rather boast about my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. Therefore I am well content with weaknesses, with insults, with distresses, with persecutions, with difficulties, for Christ's sake; for when I am weak, then I am strong.

So the context here is Paul experiencing weakness in the context of living for the Lord. For Christ's sake, he would experience weaknesses, insults, distresses, persecutions, difficulties. He said, "Most gladly, therefore, I will rather boast about my weaknesses".

It is in the context of these weaknesses that the apostle Paul would experience the power of God. He said: "...so that the power of Christ may dwell in me... for when I am weak, then I am strong."

This is a very beautiful picture of freedom in the Spirit.

What does it tell us? What does it bring across to us?

Generally, we all know we have our limitations. We have our fears, our insecurities, our concerns, our anxieties. Why? Because we are not almighty, we are not almighty God. There are many things we cannot do; there are many things that may happen to us that we may not be able to cope. So we have our anxieties, we have our fears.

There is not that sense of freedom that we can overcome, we can do, we can fulfil whatever we see that we ought to do.

However, when we come to recognize that indeed, we are totally helpless, that is when we find true freedom.

When we cling on to our own power, our own abilities, we will never experience that kind of freedom to its fullest because our freedom will always be affected by our fears, our limitations, our inabilities.

When we recognize that we are totally helpless, it is then we learn to totally depend on God, always.

Think about it. When you totally depend on God, would you have freedom? You know that God is almighty; He can do all the things that ought to be done. When we depend on Him, we now have the power to live as we ought to live, to do whatever we ought to do.

And that is why the apostle Paul said, "I can do all things through Him who strengthens me."

When we learn to appreciate the power of the Lord in our lives, then we begin to look at life differently because we are no longer looking at the world with our own eyes.

We are looking at the world together with the Lord and the Lord can overcome in any situation. So too we can overwhelmingly conquer through Him who loves us. That power comes when we learn to totally depend on Him. So then we will have freedom: freedom to be what we ought to be and freedom to do what we ought to do.

The Lord enables us to go through situations to do what we ought to do.

There are many different situations that can be very difficult but we can have the joy and the confidence that if we live for Him, He will enable us to go through the situations. That is, the Lord will enable us when we trust Him and when we walk in His ways.

The apostle Peter walked on the water when he exercised faith in the Lord, when he trusted Him. But he began to sink when his faith faltered. The power of Peter to walk on the water was not his own; it was the power of the Lord, and the power of the Lord can be sustained only by faith: It is not by our own abilities but by the power of the Lord. So if we learn to look to Him, we learn to trust Him and depend on Him, then we can walk on the water if the Lord wants us to do so.

Moses saw Him who is unseen, by true faith, which included commitment to follow the Lord. When we say we trust the Lord, we must be careful to recognize that that trust in the Lord has this important component of commitment to Him.

Hebrews 11: 24-27

- 24 By faith Moses, when he had grown up, refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter,
- 25 choosing rather to endure ill-treatment with the people of God than to enjoy the passing pleasures of sin,
- 26 considering the reproach of Christ greater riches than the treasures of Egypt; for he was looking to the reward.
- 27 By faith he left Egypt, not fearing the wrath of the king; for he endured, as seeing Him who is unseen.

Seeing Him who is unseen tells us of the eyes of faith looking at the Lord. He could see the invisible God because he was walking by faith. But this context tells us that Moses could effectively live for God because he made his choices right. He refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter; he chose to endure ill-treatment with the people of God than to enjoy the passing pleasures of sin; he considered the reproach of Christ greater riches than the treasures of Egypt. So we see he made his choice right. That is essential if we want to learn to depend on God in the right way.

There is a danger of false faith and this is where many Christians may enter into grave dangers if they have a wrong understanding of faith.

The evil one asked the Lord Jesus to throw Himself down from the pinnacle of the temple and said that God would send His angels to protect Him. This might seem to be great faith: throwing Himself down from the pinnacle of the temple and God specially protecting Him. But this would be false faith.

The Lord Jesus said, “It is written, ‘YOU SHALL NOT PUT THE LORD YOUR GOD TO THE TEST.’” Why is that so? Why was that putting the Lord to the test?

It is because that was not the will of God. If the Lord Jesus were to do that at the instigation of Satan, He would be going His own way; it would not be in accordance with God’s will. And that is putting God to the test.

So we must be careful. We must not do dangerous things in the name of faith when it is not God’s will for us. We cannot expect God to protect us when we go our own way. This is a very important qualification.

We must be prepared to move when God calls even if it is dangerous, but we must not court danger unnecessarily. We must not do things to prove that we have faith where it is not God’s will for us to do so. So that is a very important aspect to be conscious of.

The other important aspect that we need to be conscious of in this kind of faith is to recognize that we must do our part in cooperation with God and then trust Him to undertake.

Sometimes we may think that it gives God more glory if we do not do anything. We just ask God to undertake, to do everything; it seems great faith, but that is not so.

When we say, "Give us this day our daily bread", do we just sit at home and wait for the bread to come?

Is it wrong for us to do our part where God may call us, whether it be to work or in some other context? That is being responsible; we do our part as God may lead. True, there can be a range as to what is suitable for different people. But the principle is we do our part in cooperation with God.

And when we do our part, we are not taking away faith. That part that we do must arise from that faith in the Lord. We do so because it is meaningful to Him.

So it is dangerous for us to say that I just live as I wish and I trust God to undertake because He is sovereign. God expects us to do our part, to be faithful to Him and to honour Him.

There are two major aspects that we should be conscious of in the area of freedom in the Spirit.

The first aspect that we have considered has to do primarily with going through situations. Different situations that we go through, God wants us to have freedom in the Spirit, to be able to go through the situation meaningfully. For example, the apostle Paul when he had a thorn in the flesh, the grace of the Lord for him was not just for him to be able to bear with the pain. That was not the meaning. "My grace is sufficient for you" has the meaning of going through that situation meaningfully with a good spirit, in fellowship with God and peacefully going through that situation with the Lord.

This brings about the freedom in our spirit in order to be able to do the things that God wants us to do. So we have freedom to do whatever the Lord wants us to do.

But now I want to go on to the second major aspect, which is in fact the primary aspect. And that is: freedom in the Spirit has to do primarily with becoming what we ought to be, to develop the quality of our inner man.

If we do not properly develop our inner man, we cannot have true freedom in the Spirit as we go through different situations, except temporarily. Yes, God can sometimes specially enable us to go through that situation but in terms of a life of freedom, walking with God, we must develop that quality in our being in order to be able to experience that freedom in the Spirit.

Romans 8: 1-4

- 1 Therefore there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.
- 2 For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and of death.
- 3 For what the Law could not do, weak as it was through the flesh, God *did*: sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and *as an offering* for sin, He condemned sin in the flesh,
- 4 so that the requirement of the Law might be fulfilled in us, who do not walk according to the flesh but according to the Spirit.

Here the apostle Paul tells us something very important and very liberating. He says: "...the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and of death."

When we live in the context of the law of sin and of death, we have no freedom; our life is in bondage. The apostle Paul described that in **Romans 7** when he talked about the difficulty of wanting to do what is right and yet failing to do so; wanting so much to be righteous and yet not being righteous – the bondage to sin. And sin leads to death.

In **Romans 7: 5** the apostle Paul said,

Romans 7: 5

For while we were in the flesh, the sinful passions, which were *aroused* by the Law, were at work in the members of our body to bear fruit for death.

The relationship between sin and death was made clear in the Garden of Eden. God told Adam and Eve if they were to violate His commandments, if they were to go against His instructions then death would result. And the death that is primary is in the spiritual realm, although it has its effects on the physical realm.

Sin leads to death and death is the opposite of life. The law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and of death: We need to learn to live by the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus.

Romans 7 tells us that without the power of Christ, we will constantly be subject to temptations and pulls and pressures that we cannot cope. It leads to sin and death. Who will deliver us? Who will deliver this wretched man? The answer is: through Jesus Christ our Lord.

And how does the Lord Jesus Christ deliver us? He delivers us through the cross. And so we have **Romans 5** telling us how the Lord Jesus Christ reconciled us to God through His death, **Romans 6** telling us how, when we are united with Him in His death, we will also be united with Him in His resurrection. And **Romans 7** tells us that unless we depend on the Lord we will still be unable to overcome.

And so **Romans 8** goes on to tell us that the Lord Jesus has made provision for us to find the true and full freedom and that is through the law of the Spirit of life. It is the Holy Spirit who would enable us to live a life of freedom, a life where we are constantly in fellowship with God, a life where we constantly receive the life of God to transform us and when we do that, we will be set free from the law of sin and of death.

Why is that so? Why is it if we live by the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus we will be set free from the law of sin and of death?

That is because the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus is the life of God and the life of God is morally and spiritually perfect. So if we live by that we will not sin; we will not die spiritually.

So the apostle Paul says, "For what the Law could not do, weak as it was through the flesh, God *did*: sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and *as an offering* for sin, He condemned sin in the flesh, so that the requirement of the Law might be fulfilled in us, who do not walk according to the flesh but according to the Spirit."

So when we walk... according to the Spirit, we live by the power of the Spirit, we will fulfil the requirement of the Law.

Fulfilling the requirement of the Law does not come about by making great efforts on our own to seek to be righteous and good; it does not come about because we have exercised so much discipline in our lives.

Yes, we must exercise discipline, but it is discipline in the context of the Lord's enabling. When we learn to exercise ourselves in accordance with God's instructions, in a spirit of dependence on Him, it is a difficult life, it requires much discipline but it is in that context that the life of God will come to us and we will be able increasingly to develop the quality in our being.

When we think of God and how He lives His life, do we see God all the time trying to keep His laws? Does God always exercise Himself to keep all His moral laws?

This is not the picture that comes through to us in the Scriptures. God will fulfil what is good and right because His being is like that.

His moral character is such that whatever He does arises from His moral perfection. His love, His compassion, His wisdom, His holiness, His justice will be manifested in every decision that He makes.

So when we learn to walk by the Spirit, we are learning to identify with God: to understand how He lives His life, what are His values, what are important to Him, what is really precious, what is of great importance.

When we do that, our hearts are together with Him, we move together with Him, we will be manifesting the moral goodness of God; increasingly we will appreciate the character of God and our lives will be transformed to become like Him.

That is the meaning of Christ being formed in us.

So in order to develop that kind of life, we have to want to be like the Lord Jesus. That is something easy to say but not so easy to be true to. So this is an area that we have to ponder about in our lives. Do we truly want to be like the Lord Jesus, including all the difficulties and pain and suffering that may come our way because of our identification with Him?

If we do not sufficiently want that then much of the things that we do and say will be merely words and not reality. Reality has to come from a life that is lived in accordance with God's will and God's enabling.

In **Galatians 5**, the apostle Paul told the Galatian Christians, "It was for freedom that Christ set us free". He also said, "For you were called to freedom".

So Christ calls us to freedom; He wants us to be free.

But in **Galatians 5**, the apostle Paul also tells us that it is so easy to remain in bondage; it is so easy to go the wrong way. And that is something that we need to pause and consider. Why is it the Galatians did not find true freedom?

“It was for freedom that Christ set us free” and so he said, “therefore keep standing firm and do not be subject again to a yoke of slavery.” That yoke of slavery was to want to do something themselves to be justified before God.

We cannot.

We can only be justified through the event of the cross, but when we try to do something in order to justify ourselves then we will fall into bondage. And so he said, “I testify again to every man who receives circumcision, that he is under obligation to keep the whole Law. You have been severed from Christ, you who are seeking to be justified by law; you have fallen from grace.”

It is so wonderful to be able to appreciate God’s grace and yet, we still want to be justified by the law.

The underlying reason very often is: justification by the law serves our pride. “I have done it. I have achieved this; I have done that.”

Justification by grace says, “We are helpless. It is all done for me.” and we may not like it. But that is where it is the most beautiful thing: for us to properly acknowledge we cannot save ourselves; it is only Christ who can save us.

But that does not mean that it is very easy to live by grace. In order to live by grace, our hearts must be like that of the Lord. And so we see the apostle Paul also said, “For you have been called to freedom, brethren; only *do not turn* your freedom into an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another.”

We think we have freedom; we are saved by grace; we do not need to do anything. So what do we do? We make use of the freedom for selfish ends. We turn the freedom for an opportunity for the flesh. We want our own ways; we want our own things; we do not really care for others.

But that is not the freedom that the Lord wants to give us. He says: "...through love serve one another." The freedom that God has given to us is meant for us to manifest the moral perfection of God and the major aspect of it has to do with divine love, the quality of our love for others, for their well-being, the attitude that we have, the way we live our lives each day. That is what we need to concentrate on: the true quality of heart that will set us free.

So if we want to learn to attain true freedom in the Spirit, it is very important for us first to acknowledge deeply our total helplessness without God and mean it in reality; and then to depend on Him always in every situation of life.

In that context, we have to seek to walk by the Spirit with the consciousness that we only desire to fulfil the perfect will of God. That is a life of true freedom and if we do that, our lives will be like that of God. God is free to be what He should be, to do what He ought to do. We can then move in deep fellowship with God.

So then as we come before the Lord, let us ask Him to help us to ponder over our lives, to consider how we have been living our lives so far.

Are we mainly preoccupied with ourselves, our own ideas, our own desires?

Or are we deeply conscious of what is of real value for eternity, what is in the heart of God?

Do we really want this and are we prepared to give up our pride, our power, our abilities – all that we have – to submit to God and His ways so that whatever we do, we do it by His power?

But just in case we misunderstand, giving up all that we have does not mean that we no longer make use of our brains; we no longer make use of our bodies, our strength, our position in society because we have given up everything to God.

That is not the meaning. But it means we do not trust in these things; we do not depend on these things. We have given them all up to God and then we make use of these only as the Lord leads us, only in accordance with what is pleasing to Him.

And there are many things which we may be very capable in doing where the Lord may say, “Leave that alone. Do not use that. Leave it alone.” Are we prepared to do that? Or will we say, “No, it is a waste of my talent. I must make good use of all this for God.” And so we go ahead and do many things for God, we think.

So let us ask Him to help us to understand the freedom of just living for Him, depending on Him, trusting Him and knowing His life and power in each situation that we go through.