

# “Bound for Freedom”

Acts 16: 16-40



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In the movie, *The Shawshank Redemption*, Tim Robbins plays Andy Dufrense, a banker wrongly convicted of murder. Andy is incarcerated in Shawshank prison during the 1950s and 60s. Shawshank is presided over by a tyrannical and brutal warden.

As the only innocent man in the whole place, Andy has a certain internal sense of freedom that is mystifying to those around him. Yet, at times, it has a profound effect on them.

In the following scene, Andy is called into the warden's office to pick up a shipment of records that has been sent for the prison library. (And for you kids out there, a record is like a big double-sided CD.)

While the guard is using the restroom, you'll see Andy do something he's not supposed to do. You'll also hear the narrator, Morgan Freeman, telling about what it meant to the prisoners.

I love the wonderful, glorious irony of that statement by Morgan Freeman:

“It was like some beautiful bird flapped into our drab little cage and made those walls dissolve away, and for the briefest of moments, every last man at Shawshank felt free.”

Sometimes those who seem to be free are not free at all. And sometimes, those who seem to have lost their freedom are truly free.

In our scripture reading a lady (a fortune teller of sorts) follows Paul and Silas around for days and days. All the time she keeps shouting, “These men are servants/slaves of the Most High God.” v18 Over a period of days this gets very annoying. So Paul turns and heals her in the name of Jesus Christ. The slave girl is free from the forces that have enslaved her mind. She enjoys true freedom.

But, v19, the girl's owners are furious. They've been making quite a bit of money off of her. Their fortune teller no longer tells fortunes. And so they drag Paul and Silas before the magistrates. Paul and Silas are beaten and jailed. We might expect Paul and Silas to be utterly demoralized. These men are imprisoned behind locked doors, with their legs in shackles. They're sitting in the innermost cell in the middle of the night. The cell was probably very dark, almost pitch black. Yet, we're told that they pray. And more than that, they sing. They sing hymns of joy and praise to God. They offer prayer and praise. They're having a jail house rally. Though their bodies are locked up, their spirits are free.

That's a very impressive kind of freedom. It's a freedom that defies the sometimes brutal powers of the world. That's a spiritual freedom that transcends mere physical freedom. Paul and Silas are saying by their actions, “You can lock us up. You can chain our legs. But you can't have our spirits. Those belong to God. And because of that, we're free.”

And then there is an earthquake that shakes open the doors of the prison and shakes loose the shackles on the prisoners legs. Spiritual freedom is transformed into physical freedom. The glorious part to me is that just a little while before this Paul had told the people, “Through Jesus, everyone who believes is set free from all those things from which you could not be freed by the law of Moses.”

Those words apply almost as well to us. Through Jesus, we are set free from all those things that the Declaration of Independence, the Emancipation Proclamation or the Constitution cannot free us from. Through Jesus, we are set free from all those things that the accumulation of wealth and power and possessions cannot free us from.

True and ultimate freedom can never derive from anything created by human beings. Only God can give us true freedom. But it requires us to recognize and acknowledge the ways we are enslaved. I am not wishing anything upon myself but there are times I wish I was locked up in chains and shackles so I

could see the bondage and I would have to rely on God. As it is today, as with many of you, we have no idea what enslaves us.

Addictions are rampant in our society. There is a strong cultural message that we need more, buy more, and own more. There is a strong message that we need to try to be perfect parents, or perfect children. I even occasionally feel like I need to be the perfect pastor but I fall far short of everything. There is a constant pressure to achieve and succeed. I want everyone to be happy including myself. However, if we get caught up in these things, are we really free? Or is the quest for this different kind of freedom where we should focus our sights?

Today, in this very room all who call the name of Jesus, King of Kings, Lord of Lords, they are free. Today, at the same time in this very room, so many of us are prisoners; bound in chains, shackled and locked up in the inner most cell of this prison we call the world. The irony is that our jail cell is usually very pretty and comfortable. As prisoners of the world we have a great many creature comforts that continually call us to stay inside the cell.

You see Satan has to do it that way because he knows the prison is a sham, a facade, fake and totally weak. Satan knows if we ever find out there is true freedom outside the bondage of this world we will be stronger and he will not be in control anymore. Satan knows there really is no lock on the prison doors, or our chains and shackles that can hold us over the one who has the key to life, Jesus Christ. I am so embarrassed to tell you today that as the human race and in so far as our faith is concerned we are just like an elephant in a circus. An elephant in a circus at a very young age is tethered to a stake in the ground to keep it from running off. The young elephant learns it cannot be free even as it grows. The funny thing about the chain is it cannot really hold that adult elephant. It is a lie that the elephant has bought into. That adult elephant could snap that chain so easily and walk off but it doesn't know any better. Satan knows that we can leave the world behind at any time so he has to make it as enticing as he can. He has to get us to buy into the lie as well and he does a pretty good job of it. The world's way is complicated and difficult to survive in. To have everything the world offers takes your money and your time. The more money you spend on stuff the less you have on living. Debt piles up and there is less money next month because you are still paying for last month. Then the next month there is still less than the months before. You get stressed and upset. Then it takes time to make more money or even just time trying to balance it all out by moving money from one place to another or filling out a new credit card application so you can transfer other credit cards. Then you don't have as much time for family or church and that causes more problems. Do you see the trap?

There is another reason I wish that at times I would get flogged like Paul and Silas because then I would be very apprehensive of anything other than following Jesus. Unfortunately, the enemy doesn't beat me up immediately, he coaxes me, gets me comfortable, and then tries to destroy me. We get coaxed in because we do something wrong once and get away with it. We think that it was no big deal so we do it again. (This string represents the sin and bondage when we do something wrong) (Ask an older child to sit in a chair) We tell a little lie by making up a story so we don't have to go do something or see someone or maybe cheat just a little bit on a test. (Wrap string once) That is easy to get out of right? (ask child to break the string) Maybe we want to buy something we don't have the money for so we ask to borrow some cash or get a loan. Maybe we use a credit card or get an advance on our allowance. (Begin wrapping string again each time you tell of a sin) Maybe we lied to a teacher or a coworker. Maybe we avoid doing our fair share of the work and try to get out of it when we are asked. Maybe we hit our brother or sister or broke something and tried to cover it up. Maybe we somehow unfaithful to family, friends or church. Maybe we just don't want to hurt someone's feelings and ignore the truth. Maybe we want everyone else to do the work while we get the benefits. Maybe we get really jealous because someone has something we do not. Maybe we just don't think we need to go to church because we have it all figured out. It never seems like much, but it all adds up and suddenly we find ourselves in bondage. Tied down. Shackled. Imprisoned in our own life. Now try to escape. (Child should not be able to break free) That tiny little string (those little sins), your own actions, has you imprisoned inside your own life.

Do you hear that? Be really quiet and listen. Do you hear that voice in your head? The whole time,

Jesus is calling our name, as his child, saying why are you doing that? Have you not learned there is a much better and easier way, Matthew 11:29-30 “Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.”

Today we are free. The only bondage is that which we choose. I am going to choose freedom. Jesus has turn on the “unshackle your chains” sign! I cannot tell you how many times I have heard the words of Martin Luther King, Jr. in my head during my lifetime. I cannot tell you how many times I witness or hear or read about something in our world that makes causes me remember his famous words from August 28, 1963. While I agree wholeheartedly with the original intent of those words condemning racial injustice and calling for racial equality, I think that he also intended the words to resonate with the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Hear these words and think about today’s teaching and how God wants you to be free at last: “Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.”

“And when this happens, and when we allow freedom ring, when we let it ring from every village and every hamlet, from every state and every city, we will be able to speed up that day when all of God’s children, black men and white men, Jews and Gentiles, Protestants and Catholics, will be able to join hands and sing in the words of the old negro spiritual, “Free at last, free at last. Thank God Almighty, we are free at last.”