

Finding Your Freedom Within the Sovereignty of God**I. Introduction**

- A. Our culture today has bought into absurdity and contradiction. There has always been a war for our minds and our souls, but it is so out in the open now.
- B. One of the great battles is over the dignity of the human race. Is human life sacred? Are we created in the image of God? Do we matter? Or, do we strut and fret our moments on the stage and then vanish away?
- C. One of the greatest debates right now is over the issue of free will. This has always been a tug of war.
 - 1. On one extreme: free will... with no constraint in sight.
 - a) Do as you please. You are a free agent. You are master and commander of your fate. There is no heaven above. There is no God above. You are your own god. All is god. Nothing is god. Eat drink and be merry for tomorrow you die.
 - 2. On the other extreme: determinism... with no freedom in sight.
 - a) You are at the mercy of the stars. You are at the mercy of society and social constructs. You are a victim of the fates, or the gods. You are the product of change — chemical ping pong balls bouncing around in an energy soup. Your life, even your criminality, is written in your DNA, and there is nothing you can do about it.
 - 3. This is the great tug of war in philosophy and culture.
 - 4. I think it is the great tug of war in every heart.
 - 5. Into this mess, God sent his Word. In his word, God offers the greatest kind of freedom a soul can imagine, within and beneath the most invincible power the universe can know.
- D. Will you think with me today on the topic:

II. Finding Your Freedom Within the Sovereignty of God.

- A. We have been studying Ezra. Ezra was a priest of ancient Israel. He lived around 500 years bc.
- B. During that era, a lot of major stuff was happening. God's people had been in exile. They had been in exile for about 70 years.
 - 1. This is cool. This is awesome. This is a comeback.
 - 2. We are all about the comeback.
- C. By the time of Ezra, the Jews were beginning to return to the Promised Land. When they returned, they found their city was destroyed, their altar was destroyed, their temple was destroyed.
- D. They rebuilt their altar, and started sacrificing again to God, for the first time in 70 years.
 - 1. Then they started rebuilding their temple. When that happened, the neighboring thugs and government officials ordered them to stop. You can't build that temple! You don't have a permit.
 - 2. And even though they actually did have a permit, the people wimped out. They wimped out, dropped their tools, and stopped building the temple. They laid the foundation, but now the foundation is gathering dust.
 - a) Fast forward about two years.
- E. Now, with the help of some really excellent preachers, the people start building the temple again.
 - 1. But, once again, the neighboring thugs and government officials ordered them to stop.
 - 2. This time, however, it was different. This time, God's people didn't wimp out. This time, even though the opposition was mightier, their guts and grit were mightier too.
 - 3. God's people said, God told us to rebuild this temple, and you can't stop us. We have a permit. Check the records.
- F. The officials from the permit office say, okay. We'll check. They write up a report, send it back to King Darius in Babylon. And they wait for an answer.
- G. Chapter 6 has the answer, and something really awesome happens.

III. Then King Darius issued a decree, and a search was made in the archives, where the treasures were stored in Babylon. And at Achmetha, in the palace that is in the province of Media, a scroll was found, and in it a record was written thus: (Ezra 6:1, 2)

- A. God does not need our conscious cooperation to accomplish his purposes.
- B. In chapter one, it was King Cyrus.
- C. In chapter six, it's King Darius.
 - 1. *Lesson 1: Earthly kings come and go, but the God of Heaven and Earth reigns forever.*
- D. The story of Ezra is crafted to teach this lesson.
- E. This is called the Sovereignty of God.
 - 1. *Lesson 2: The Sovereignty of God: God is the caring and powerful ruler of my life and my world.*
- F. Ezra puts God's sovereignty on display. He puts sovereignty on display by telling the story of the temple.
 - 1. King Solomon of the Jews builds this magnificent temple. Five hundred years later...
 - 2. King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon invades Judah. He forces the first batch of Jews into exile... And then... about 19 to 20 years later, he comes back and...
 - 3. King Nebuchadnezzar tears down the temple. Fast forward 50 years....
 - 4. King Cyrus, of Persia has a strange idea.
- G. See, Babylon has fallen, and Persia has become dominant. But this isn't the first time something like this has happened. World dominance kept bouncing around. It was Egypt for a while. Later it was Assyria. Then Babylon. Then Persia. Then Greece. Then Rome.
- H. Earthly kings come and go. And by the beginning of Ezra, it was King Cyrus of Persia.
 - 1. Cyrus had just conquered Babylon, a military and economic engine. The domain of King Cyrus now stretches from Egypt and Greece almost to India. He is a mighty. He is cunning. He is ruthless. You don't mess with King Cyrus.
 - 2. But one day, an idea just popped into his head. His idea was to release the Jews from Exile, which is awesome.
 - a) But even more awesome is to command them to rebuild their temple.

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- b) But even even more more awesome awesome, Cyrus orders his version of Fort Knox to return to the Jews all the precious gold and silver artifacts that Nebuchadnezzar looted from the temple 70 years ago.
3. That was the idea that popped into the head of mighty king Cyrus.
4. Who put it there?
 - a) *Now in the first year of Cyrus king of Persia, that the word of the LORD by the mouth of Jeremiah might be fulfilled, the LORD stirred up the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia, so that he made a proclamation throughout all his kingdom, and also put it in writing, saying, (Ezra 1:1)*
5. And right out of the gate, Ezra is pointing to the King of kings and Lord of lords.
6. At the height of his glory, the most powerful king on earth is a tool in the hands of God to display his power.
7. But, as we have seen, just because God is sovereign doesn't mean we won't face opposition.
 - a) *Lesson 3: The sovereign purposes of God do not exempt us from troubles in this life.*
The sovereign purposes of God do not exempt us from FAITH in troubles in this life.
8. You can be doing everything right with God, and still troubles will come. This is the hardest thing.
 - a) Why do bad things happen?
 - b) Why is life so hard?
 - c) Where is God when it hurts?
 - d) Why has God let me down time and time again?
 - e) If God is all powerful, why so much bad stuff?
9. It can feel like whiplash.
 - a) Good stuff, good stuff, good stuff, good stuff... then
(1) BAM! The worst news you can imagine.
 - b) You ride out that storm... and good stuff comes back.... And it's good stuff, good stuff, good stuff, good stuff, and then
(1) BAM! More bad news.
10. Why God? And, why me God? Or... Why my kid, God?
11. It hurts. It's hard. And it is so easy to turn away from God. Or maybe, not to turn away from him altogether, just 45 degrees away from him.
 - a) A cold shoulder.
 - b) A calloused heart.
 - c) You make no sense to me.
(1) But this is the danger, and this is the great need of maturity and faith.
12. Whatever else we can say, this we know...
 - a) Suffering may be lasting, but it is not everlasting.
 - b) Suffering brings a sting, but also a wing, and in God's time, sorrow will soon fly away.
 - c) The heavier your cross may be, the heavier your crown in glory shall be.
(1) *Lesson 4: This fallen world is a morally broken Pain Machine.*
But God's perfect Grace Machine chews up the Pain Machine in the end.
13. Why? Because God is sovereign, even over the things that break your heart. None of this can be understood except in the rearview mirror.
 - a) Are you hurting today? Are you suffering?
(1) I can't explain it. I have no glib answers for you.
(2) I don't judge you. I don't condemn you.
(3) I ache with you.
(4) I can't claim to know the why's and wherefore's of the plan of God.
14. But of this you can be sure.
15. One day, from the heights of heaven and the miracles of Mount Eternity, you will look back on your life with Jesus Christ at your side, and you will confess that he has done all things well.
 - a) And...
(1) *Lesson 5: The heavenly rewards for faith on earth will make every trial worth it all.*
(a) It will be worth it all when we see Jesus.
16. God turns the heart of mighty Cyrus, and now he turns the heart of the new king of Persia... Darius.
 - I. *Then King Darius issued a decree, and a search was made in the archives, where the treasures were stored in Babylon. And at Achmetha, in the palace that is in the province of Media, a scroll was found, and in it a record was written thus: In the first year of King Cyrus, King Cyrus issued a decree concerning the house of God at Jerusalem: "Let the house be rebuilt, the place where they offered sacrifices; and let the foundations of it be firmly laid, its height sixty cubits and its width sixty cubits, with three rows of heavy stones and one row of new timber. Let the expenses be paid from the king's treasury. Also let the gold and silver articles of the house of God, which Nebuchadnezzar took from the temple which is in Jerusalem and brought to Babylon, be restored and taken back to the temple which is in Jerusalem, each to its place; and deposit them in the house of God"-- (Ezra 6:1-5)*
 1. The Jews came back. They started building their temple.
 2. But then there was opposition, and they stopped.
 3. By chapter 5 some years have passed, but the Jews started building their temple again.
 4. But there was opposition again, only this time, they didn't stop.
 5. The first time, they wimped out.

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6. But this time, the second time, they kept the faith.
7. The officials of the region told them they needed a building permit.
8. The Jews said we have a building permit, it came from Cyrus. Search your records.
 - a) Problem was Cyrus was gone, and two more kings came and went till now it was Darius on the throne.
 - b) And Darius commanded his people to search the records in Babylon. No dice.
 - c) So they searched the summer capital in Ecbatana (Achmetha), and there it was.
 - (1) *Lesson 6: God, in his sovereignty, never forgets a promise, and never forsakes his Word.*
 - (a) If he promised to forgive your sins, they are forgiven.
 - (b) If he promised to forget them, they are gone.
 - (c) If he promised to work all things together for the good of those who loved him, then all things are on the right track.
 - i) He doesn't have to do a search.
 - ii) He doesn't have to set reminders.
 - (d) If God promised to comfort you in your afflictions, he is there, holding your hand with one hand, even as a legion of angels keeps the demons at bay.
 - (e) If he promised mercies new every morning, there they are sprinkled like manna in the wilderness and an oasis in the desert.
 - (f) If he promised to never let you go, then no sin, no darkness, no foe can pry you from his hand.
 - i) Because God, in his sovereignty, never forgets a promise and never forsakes his word.
 - ii) His will is his word, and his word is his oath.
 - (2) When the opposition calls you unable, God's Word calls you able to do all things.
 - (a) When the opposition calls you weak, God calls you strong.
 - (b) When the opposition calls you a failure, God calls you more than a conqueror.
 - (c) When the opposition calls you victim, God calls you victor.
 - (d) When the opposition calls you dirty, God calls you cleansed.
 - (e) When the opposition calls you sinner, God calls you saint.
 - i) And in his sovereign power, what he has called you to be, he makes you to become.
 - ii) Because God, in his sovereignty, never forgets a promise and never forsakes his word.
 - (1) What this means is that:
 - (a) *Lesson 7: You find your highest dignity, purpose, and freedom when you position your life within the sovereign will of God.*
 - (2) This is freedom.
 - (3) And this is counterintuitive.
 - (a) To make yourself free you must make Jesus your ruler. You must embrace your king.
 - (4) It is not freedom to shake off the rule of God... it is freedom to embrace it, and live within it. Why? I'll answer that in a minute.
 - (3) God needs no reminders. But Darius did.
 9. So, Darius follows the decree of Cyrus, and writes back this awesome summary basically saying, yes, they have a permit. Grace.
 - a) And yes, they can build the temple. More grace.
 - b) And yes, the king's treasury will pay for it. Amazing Grace.
 - (1) But it gets better... hold your horses.
 - (2) Because in the next verse, the Great King of Persia speaks to those who opposed God's people.

J. Now therefore, Tattenai, governor of the region beyond the River, and Shethar-Boznai, and your companions the Persians who are beyond the River, **KEEP YOURSELVES FAR FROM THERE. Let the work of this house of God alone; let the governor of the Jews and the elders of the Jews build this house of God on its site. (Ezra 6:6, 7)**

 1. Who's your daddy now, permit office!
 - a) *Fear not, for I am with you; Be not dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you, Yes, I will help you, I will uphold you with My righteous right hand.' (Isaiah 41:10)*
 - b) *God is our refuge and strength, A very present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear, Even though the earth be removed, And though the mountains be carried into the midst of the sea; (Psalms 46:1, 2)*
 - (1) Hey, bad guys, **KEEP YOURSELF FAR FROM THERE.**
 - (2) Hey, mean girls, **KEEP YOURSELF FAR FROM THERE.**
 - c) *The LORD is my rock and my fortress and my deliverer; The God of my strength, in whom I will trust; My shield and the horn of my salvation, My stronghold and my refuge; My Savior, You save me from violence. I will call upon the LORD, who is worthy to be praised; So shall I be saved from my enemies. (2 Samuel 22:2-4)*
 - (1) Hey bullies, narcissists, liars, and seducers, **KEEP YOURSELF FAR FROM THERE.**
 - (2) Hey temptation, **KEEP YOURSELF FAR FROM THERE.**
 - (3) Hey, drugs, alcohol, pornography, addiction, and poverty, **KEEP YOURSELF FAR FROM THERE.**
 - d) *When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; And through the rivers, they shall not overflow you. When you walk through the fire, you shall not be burned, Nor shall the flame scorch you. For I am the LORD your God, The Holy One of Israel, your Savior. (Isaiah 43:2, 3)*

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(1) Hey, Satan... KEEP YOURSELF FAR FROM THERE!

e) This is God speaking through the king. This is the sovereign God using the pagan king to declare his will.

(1) Because...

(a) *Lesson 8: God can squeeze protection and blessing out of any source, situation, or circumstance in your life.*

2. This is his overruling sovereignty.

3. But it still gets better.

K. *Moreover I issue a decree as to what you shall do for the elders of these Jews, for the building of this house of God: Let the cost be paid at the king's expense from taxes on the region beyond the River; this is to be given immediately to these men, so that they are not hindered. And whatever they need--young bulls, rams, and lambs for the burnt offerings of the God of heaven, wheat, salt, wine, and oil, according to the request of the priests who are in Jerusalem--let it be given them day by day without fail, that they may offer sacrifices of sweet aroma to the God of heaven, and pray for the life of the king and his sons. (Ezra 6:8-10)*

1. In chapter 4, first set of adversaries stands in opposition to God's people.

2. In chapter 5, the second set of adversaries stands in opposition to God's people.

3. In chapter 6, those adversaries who stood against the building of the temple, now have to supply the the bulls, rams, lambs, wheat, salt, wine, and oil to serve the priests that serve the temple... all at their own expense.

a) And all of this is done at the surface level by King Darius, who isn't even conscious that the King above every king has been working in the shadows all along.

(1) There was a boy, who was thrown into a pit, and sold into slavery, and thrown into jail... and he prayed with all his might against every step of the way... but God seemed not to hear... until one day Joseph woke up to become the 2nd ruler in all of Egypt and to save millions for famine and death.

(a) They all meant it for evil, but God meant it for good.

i) It was keeping faith in the trial he couldn't control that brought him to a throne where he could rule the known world.

(2) There was a girl, taken for her beauty, and groomed to be consort to a king — a fate she prayed against, and a contest she prayed to lose. One day, Esther woke up as queen of all Persia, counselor to the king, and she saved her people from genocide and Holocaust.

(a) They all meant it for evil, but God positioned her for such a time as this.

i) It was keeping faith during the trial she couldn't control that brought her to a throne where she found her royalty, embraced her God-given sovereignty.

(3) There was a man, taken for crimes he didn't commit, and tried in courts without jurisdiction, and beaten and bloodied against the law — a man who prayed that if there was any other way, Let this cup be taken from me — yet on the third day, "up from the grave he arose, with a mighty triumph o'er his foes."

(a) The devil meant it for evil, and started his victory dance, but God sprung his trap, and crushed the head of evil winning salvation for all who believe.

i) It was keeping faith in the trial he prayed against, that made God say "Therefore I have exalted you..."

(1) Their trials were a gateway to a royalty and freedom and joy they would not have known otherwise.

(4) Even the Jews in Ezra's day, praying that these adversaries just disappear...

(a) And yet, because of their opposition, because of their sin, really...

i) The fiercest foes are now footing the bill for the offerings and sacrifices to God.

ii) Only God.

(5) That is the greatness of your God.

IV. Conclusion

A. I said earlier... It is not freedom to shake off the rule of God... it is freedom to embrace it, and live within it. Why?

B. Because of our last lesson for today:

1. *Lesson 9: You will never find a better, more gracious, loving, powerful, and wise king than Jesus.*

C. Even you on your best days will not rule your life with the kind of mercy and wisdom he offers.

D. Everything your heart desires and more is found tucked inside joyful respect for, and submission to, and acquiescence with the perfect will and gracious sovereignty of God.

E. Determinism vs Freedom?

1. I would rather live submitted to the Sovereignty of God...than to live unrestricted under the tyranny of a world that has shrugged him off.

F. It could be that you are listening to my words today, and you know there is a tug of war in your heart.

1. You are fighting against Jesus.

2. You are bitter against what he has allowed.

a) I understand.

b) You make sense.

3. But I would ask you, where can you turn? Who will do a better job of shepherding your life and world than God? Where else can you go?

G. Submission to King Jesus is a greater freedom than an unrestrained life under the lies of the world.

H. No one stands so tall as when they bow before the Cross of Christ.

I. And let us all bow before him, right now.