

Jeremiah 31:31-34

Freedom is a word that we American's have always held **dear**. And when our freedoms come under **attack**, we cling to them even **tighter**. Thousands upon thousands of our fellow citizens have **fought** for and have even **died**, to **preserve** our freedoms. The concept of freedom is **also** very near to the heart of every **Christian**. It's one of the great themes found on the pages of the Bible. **Jeremiah** had a message of **freedom** for God's people thousands of years ago. The freedom he proclaimed was **The Freedom Of The New Covenant**.

The Freedom Of The New Covenant stands in stark **contrast** to the **bondage** of the **old** covenant. That was the covenant which God had made with the Children of Israel at **Mt. Sinai**. It was a covenant based on **laws** and **regulations** which governed **every aspect** of the Israelites' lives. There were regulations on the kinds of **food** they could eat, on the types of **sacrifices** they needed to make, and on the type of **government** they would have. It didn't take very long before it became **clear** that the Israelites wouldn't be able to **keep** their side of the agreement. The **history** of God's chosen people in the Old Testament is an ongoing story of **broken** promises, and open **rebellion** against God's commands. The **yoke** of the **old** covenant proved to be a **yoke** that the people weren't able to **carry**. Even those who remained **faithful** to the LORD must have been led to the point of **despair** when they looked at how **often** they had **broken** God's commands. The old covenant was a constant reminder of their **sin**, and their inability to **atone** for their sin with their own **works**.

But now let's move ahead some 3,000 years from giving of the law at Mt. Sinai, to the church of the early 1500's - the church that **Martin Luther** was born into. Just like the people of Judah in Jeremiah's day, it was a church that was under the heavy **burden** of **laws** and **regulations**. But they **weren't** the laws which God had established at Mt. Sinai. The church of **Luther's** day had established its **own** laws for the people to follow. They had set up a system of **work righteousness** - a system where you would have to perform **certain acts**, or buy **certain indulgences**, in order to receive **forgiveness** for your sins. It was a system which made the people feel very **guilty**. After all, how could they ever **know** if they had done **all** of the right things? How could they **know** if they had ever done **enough**?

This was the system which led Luther into the harsh life of being a **monk**. He **prayed** for hours - he went to **confession** - he even **beat** himself to try and **drive** sin out of his body. But no matter **how many** good works he did, Luther couldn't **escape** the oppressive **burden** of the **law**. He once said that he felt like he

was being **closed in** by four **walls**. The first wall said that God is **holy** and **hates** sin. The second wall said that he was a **sinner**. The third wall said that the **wages** of sin is **death**. And the **last** wall concluded that God must **condemn** him to death because of his sin. This was a time of deep **despair** in Luther's life. There seemed to be **no way out**, because no matter what he **did**, he still remained **trapped** by the shackles of the church's teaching of **work righteousness**.

But that was 500 years ago, and we don't believe in **work righteousness** anymore **today**, do we? Actually, the false idea that we have to **do good** in order to get to heaven is something which is **deeply rooted** in our hearts from the day we're **born**. We see this idea most **often** in people who don't know the truth of what the **Bible** says in regard to **sin** and its **consequences**. When we ask people who don't know about Jesus why they think they are going to **heaven**, they will almost **always** respond, "Because I'm a pretty **good** person. I try to be **nice** to people. I **work hard** at my job." And that's the **same** idea we **all** fall back on when we start to doubt the **truths** that we've learned about **Jesus**. There's always going to be a **part** of us that wants to say, "Of **course** I'm going to heaven - I've been **good**." But that thought will eventually lead us to **despair**, because we know deep down that we **haven't** been good - at least not **every moment** of **every day**. For every day that we've been **kind** and **generous**, we can think of even **more** days when we've been **selfish** and **unloving**. And that can only lead us to feelings of **guilt**.

I think it's pretty safe for me to say that there isn't **anybody** here today who feels like they've done so many good works, that God **has to** take them into heaven. Instead, we **struggle** with feeling **bad** about **ourselves** and our work righteous **attitudes**. We see how completely **unworthy** we are, and how we keep falling into the same **sins** - and we think to ourselves, "How could God **ever** take **me** into His home in **heaven**?" We end up overwhelmed by feelings of **guilt** and **shame** - **trapped** within those same four walls as Martin Luther, with no **relief** in sight. At times like that, we need to be reminded of the message that **Jeremiah** brings in our text this morning.

Just think about how **wonderful** it was for those Old Testament believers to hear the words, "*I will make a **new** covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah.*" This **new** covenant would mean **freedom** for God's people. It would mean that they would be **free** from the **rules** and **regulations** that came with the **old** covenant. But, more importantly, they would **also** be set free from the **guilt** and power of **sin** in their lives. Jeremiah describes the heart and soul of the new covenant with these words, "*For I will **forgive** their guilt, and I will remember*

their sins no more.” The new covenant would remind the people that all of their **sacrifices** and all of their **laws** were leading up to a **single event** - the once-for-all sacrifice of **Jesus** on the cross. The old covenant would no longer be **necessary**, because all of its **requirements** would be **fulfilled** by the **Messiah** - their **Savior**. Jeremiah’s message brought **hope** to all those Old Testament believers who felt **trapped** and **burdened** by the laws of the **old** covenant. **Freedom** was on the way.

That’s the freedom which **Luther** was longing for during his days as an Augustinian **monk**. And it’s the freedom which Luther **found** in his study of **God’s Word**. It had taken a long time, but Luther finally made a vital **connection**. The righteousness which God **demand**s from us is also the righteousness which God has **given** us, through **faith** in **Jesus**. Luther finally realized that he didn’t need to **beat** his body in order to **earn** God’s **forgiveness**. Rather, God offered His forgiveness **freely** in **Jesus**. Luther no longer looked at God as an all-terrible **judge**, but rather as his all-merciful **Father** in heaven. It was a huge **turning point** in Luther’s life. Here’s how Luther described the experience: *“Night and day I pondered until I saw the **connection** between the **justice of God** and the statement that ‘The **just** shall live by his **faith**.’ Then I **grasped** that the **justice of God** is that righteousness by which through grace and sheer mercy **God justifies us through faith**. Thereupon I felt myself to be **reborn** and to have gone through open doors into **paradise**.”*

It has often been said that **freedom** isn’t **free** - and it’s **not**. The spiritual freedom we **have** was **bought** by the suffering and death of our Lord **Jesus**. His work sealed the **new covenant** for us - the covenant which guarantees that God will **forgive** our guilt, and remember our sins **no more**. But you already **know** that. God told His people through the Prophet Jeremiah, *“I will put my law in their **minds**, and I will write it on their **hearts**. I will be their **God**, and they will be my **people**. No longer will each one **teach** his neighbor, or each one **teach** his brother, saying, **“Know the Lord,”** because they will **all know me**, from the **least** of them to the **greatest**, declares the Lord.”* God wrote the beautiful truth of His new covenant in our **hearts** on the day we were **baptized**. And He **continues** to write it on our hearts as we come and hear **His Word**, and receive **Holy Communion**.

As Christians, we **rejoice** in our God-given freedom. We have been set **free** from the demands of the **law** - **free** from the curse of **sin** - and **free** from the power of **death**. But there is **another** side to the coin as well. Not only do we look at what we have been set free **from**, but also need to look at what we have been set free **for**. Christian **freedom** means the freedom to **serve God**, and to **serve others**. That **serving** isn’t **oppressive** service - it’s not something that we **have** to do, but rather,

it's service that we carry out **willingly**, because we are **thankful** for the freedom which Jesus has **won** for us, and that He has **given** to us.

Many of you have probably seen the movie, Braveheart. One of the more **memorable** scenes in that movie is the **execution** of William Wallace. As the executioner is about to deliver the **final blow** with his ax, Wallace musters all his strength, and shouts out one final word - **freedom!** Freedom is **also** the battle cry of the Christian **Church**. As heirs of that freedom, it's now our **privilege** and **responsibility** to share **The Freedom Of The New Covenant** with all those who are still **enslaved** by sin and guilt. Amen.