

FREEDOM IN THE KING

DEVOTIONAL READING: [John 8:31–38](#)

BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE: [John 8:31–38](#)

JOHN 8:31–38

³¹ To the Jews who had believed him, Jesus said, “If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. ³² Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.”

³³ They answered him, “We are Abraham’s descendants and have never been slaves of anyone. How can you say that we shall be set free?”

³⁴ Jesus replied, “Very truly I tell you, everyone who sins is a slave to sin. ³⁵ Now a slave has no permanent place in the family, but a son belongs to it forever. ³⁶ So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed. ³⁷ I know that you are Abraham’s descendants. Yet you are looking for a way to kill me, because you have no room for my word. ³⁸ I am telling you what I have seen in the Father’s presence, and you are doing what you have heard from your father.”



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KEY TEXT

If the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed.—John 8:36

GOD FREES AND REDEEMS

Unit 2: Liberating Gospels

LESSONS 5–8

LESSON AIMS

After participating in this lesson, each learner will be able to:

1. Identify the two referred to as “Father” and “father.”
2. Explain the nature of the freedom available in the Son.

3. Create a list of ways to continue abiding in Jesus.

LESSON OUTLINE

Introduction

- A. Freedom Day
- B. Lesson Context
- I. Jesus Speaks (John 8:31–32)
 - A. Word and Discipleship (v. 31)
 - B. Truth and Freedom (v. 32)
- II. Believers React (John 8:33)
 - A. Declaration (v. 33a)
 - B. Question (v. 33b)
- III. Jesus Responds (John 8:34–38)
 - A. Sin and Servitude (v. 34)
Smoke and Mirrors
 - B. Temporary and Permanent (v. 35)
 - C. Son and Freedom (v. 36)
Fixing Stitches
 - D. What and Why (vv. 37–38)

Conclusion

- A. True Freedom
- B. Prayer
- C. Thought to Remember

HOW TO SAY IT

Abrahamic	Ay-bruh- <i>ham</i> -ik.
Mishna	<i>Mish</i> -nuh.
Siloam	Sigh- <i>lo</i> -um.
synoptic	sih- <i>nawp</i> -tihk.
Tishri	<i>Tish</i> -ree.

I. Introduction

A. Freedom Day

April 27, 1994. For many South Africans, this date marked a new reality and brought a new expression of freedom. On this date the first post-apartheid national election was held. For the first time in decades, all South Africans of voting age were eligible to vote, regardless of their ethnic heritage or skin color. During the apartheid era, indigenous peoples and people of color lacked the freedom to vote. Further, apartheid placed overt segregationist restrictions on non-white citizens of South Africa. Even in their own country, non-white South Africans were not free to live full and flourishing lives.

By the early 1990s, after 50 years of discriminatory and unjust practices, negotiations between governing parties began the long process of undoing apartheid-era restrictions. One result of the negotiations was free elections. On April 27, 1994, millions of newly enfranchised South Africans voted for a new government and, therefore, a freer vision of life. Freedom Day serves to remind South Africans of the decades-long quest for equality and the desire for all South Africans to experience freedom.

Freedom can be looked at from at least four angles: (1) those who have freedom, and they know it; (2) those who lack freedom, and they know it; (3) those who have freedom, but they don't realize it; and (4) those who lack freedom, but they don't know it. Various forms of the words *freedom*, *liberty*, and their synonyms occur dozens of times in the New Testament, indicating the importance of the topic. We need to know which of the four categories we're in spiritually.

B. Lesson Context

The Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke are called synoptic. This designation implies that these Gospels tell the story of Jesus from similar perspectives. (For an example of these similarities, compare [Matthew 24:4–8](#); [Mark 13:5–8](#); and [Luke 21:8–11](#).)

However, John's Gospel is different. While telling the same basic story of Jesus, John often includes material not found in the synoptic Gospels (example: Jesus' "Bread of Heaven Discourse" in [John 6:25–59](#)). In other instances John omits material found in the synoptic Gospels (example: Jesus' transfiguration in [Matthew 17:1–9](#); [Mark 9:2–13](#); and [Luke 9:28–36](#)).

Today's Scripture text is an example of the former. The synoptics Gospels do not mention Jesus' teaching found in [John 7–9](#). That John's Gospel has different emphases than the synoptics does not mean that John cannot be trusted. Just as different observers might have dissimilar yet accurate retellings of the same event, John's depiction provides a different yet complementary perspective on Jesus' person and work.

John's Gospel notes the special relationship he had with Jesus (see [John 13:23](#); [19:26](#); [21:7](#), [20](#)). Further John was one of three witnesses to Jesus' transfiguration (see [Matthew 17:1–8](#); [Mark 9:2–8](#); [Luke 9:28–36](#)). John was among the closest of Jesus' disciples—he had a front-

row seat to Jesus' person and work. Therefore, John's attestation can be trusted (see [John 21:24](#)).

Today's Scripture passage is a part of a longer discourse that took place in Jerusalem during the Festival of Tabernacles (see [John 7:2, 10, 14](#)). The observance was one of Israel's most important celebrations and dated to the time of Moses (see [Leviticus 23:33–36, 39–43](#); [Numbers 29:12–34](#); [Deuteronomy 16:13–17](#); [31:10](#)).

The festival began on the 15th day of the month of Tishri, which is in late September or early October. Its significance was twofold. First, it celebrated the end of the harvest season. Second, it commemorated God's provision during Israel's wilderness wanderings. After the Israelites left Egypt, but before they entered the promised land, the people lived in tents. The celebration was to remind Israel of this history. Ultimately the festival thanked God for his daily provision.

The festival provided a backdrop for Jesus to express his divine identity by using items common in first-century observation: water and lamp light. During the festival, a priest took water from the Pool of Siloam, carried it to the temple, and poured it over the altar. On the festival's final day the priest marched around the altar without pouring water. This act demonstrated hopeful expectation that the Messiah would provide water as had been promised centuries before (see [Joel 3:18](#)). On the festival's seventh day, against this backdrop, Jesus stated, "Let anyone who is thirsty come to me and drink" ([John 7:37](#)).

Additionally, on each night of the festival, except on the Sabbath, giant oil lamps were lit in the temple's Court of Women. It was against this backdrop that Jesus proclaimed himself to be "the light of the world" and that whoever followed him "will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life" ([John 8:12](#)). Jesus proclaimed himself to be the fulfillment of Israel's messianic hope, speaking the words of his heavenly Father (see [8:28](#)).

I. Jesus Speaks

([JOHN 8:31–32](#))

A. Word and Discipleship (v. 31)

31. To the Jews who had believed him, Jesus said, "If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples.

The focus of Jesus' teaching was on *the Jews who had* "believed in him" ([John 7:31](#)). Their belief was due, in part, to his pointed teaching ([7:14, 46](#)) and miraculous healing acts ([7:21](#)). However Jesus questioned whether they had true belief of "he who sent me ... You do not know him" ([7:28](#)). Did their belief go no deeper than simple amazement at his miraculous healing acts?

In the verse before us, *Jesus* established the way to distinguish proper belief from improper belief: only those who continued in his *teaching* were to be counted among his *disciples*. Merely to be amazed at and respectful of his miraculous acts and brilliant teaching was not enough. The test of true and lasting belief was to be found in persistently following Jesus' words, teachings, and commandments (see [John 14:15, 21, 23](#); [1 John 2:4](#)). Fickle faith in contrast to valid faith is a running theme in this Gospel (compare and contrast [John 2:23–25](#); [4:48](#); [5:24](#); [6:60](#); [10:38](#); also [2 John 9](#); [Revelation 2:26](#)).

The Old Testament described Moses as Israel's teacher (see [Deuteronomy 4:1–2](#)). Therefore, Jesus' opponents claimed to be disciples of Moses ([John 9:28–29](#)). Their claim was appropriate—God spoke through Moses, so to be Moses' disciple was to be God's disciple. But now God had revealed himself more fully through Jesus, so to listen to the teachings of Jesus was to listen to God (see [7:16](#); [12:49–50](#)).

God said that he would hold Israel accountable for ignoring the teachings of his prophet Moses ([Deuteronomy 18:19](#)). To reject or ignore Jesus' words was the same as rejecting God's words. As a result God would hold people accountable, just as he did with ancient Israel. If God punished Israel for not listening to Moses, how much more will he judge those who don't listen to the teachings of Jesus?

To *hold* implied the intimate knowledge disciples were to have of Jesus' teaching: they were to dwell on and in it. The Greek word behind this translation is used in the writings of John more than all other New Testament writers combined. It indicates closeness and association with Jesus and God and the fellowship of true disciples (see [John 15:1–20](#); [1 John 3:9](#)). They believed based on Jesus' teaching and, in response, followed him. Such disciples would know his Father (see [2 John 9](#)).

What Do You Think?

How do [John 15:11–17](#) and [1 John 2:3–10](#) provide a framework for the ways Christians can grow as disciples of Jesus?

Digging Deeper

What prevents Christians from following Jesus' teaching and growing as his disciples?

B. Truth and Freedom (v. 32)

32. “Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.”

A discussion on the nature of freedom might lead to different interpretations. For some, an expression of freedom implies unrestrained pursuit of personal desires. For others an expression of freedom may mean nothing more than the ability to refuse to submit to anyone—an attitude of defiance. However, these interpretations do not address the freedom

that Jesus implied. The freedom to which Jesus alluded was an eternal freedom, not human expectations of earthly freedom.

As disciples continued to follow Jesus' teaching (see commentary on [John 8:31](#), above), their knowledge of God's *truth* would expand. Old Testament Scriptures describe truth in terms of God's faithfulness and salvation (see [Exodus 34:6](#); [2 Samuel 2:6](#); [Psalms 25:5](#); [119:142, 151, 160](#); [Isaiah 61:8](#)). John's Gospel continued with this idea and applied truth to the person and work of Jesus, "the way and the truth and the life" ([John 14:6](#); see [1:17](#); [18:37](#)). As disciples remained in Jesus' teaching, they would know his truth: a life made *free* through salvation found in Christ Jesus.

What Do You Think?

How will you evaluate your habits to make sure you're living in accordance with God's truth?

Digging Deeper

How will you respond to those who see Christianity as merely following "a bunch of rules?"

II. Believers React

([JOHN 8:33](#))

A. Declaration (v. [33a](#))

33a. They answered him, "We are Abraham's descendants and have never been slaves of anyone."

Jesus had reminded hearers that he was "not of this world" but was instead "from above" ([John 8:23](#)). When he tried teaching on heavenly things, his hearers often misunderstood his point. For example, Jesus taught that a person must be "born again" ([3:3](#)), but Nicodemus assumed natural birth ([3:4](#)). Jesus had offered "living water" to a Samaritan woman ([4:10](#)), but she assumed natural water ([4:11](#)). These misunderstandings occurred because people did not recognize that Jesus spoke concerning spiritual realities. The Jews who *answered* Jesus here fell prey to similar misunderstandings; they assumed Jesus was teaching about physical freedom.

Their response to Jesus acknowledged a particular nationalistic identity but showed disregard for a key part of that identity. Their place as *descendants* of Abraham was a central aspect of Israel's covenant with God (see [Genesis 13:15](#); [17:8](#)). Their identity as a people centered on the promises made by God to Abraham. Therefore, to align with Abraham was an ethnic identification that related Israel to God by means of covenant (see [Luke 13:16](#); [19:9](#)).

However, the declaration that *we ... have never been slaves of anyone* failed to acknowledge previous commands made to Israel. Moses commanded Israel to "remember that you were

slaves in Egypt” ([Deuteronomy 5:15](#); see [15:15](#); [16:12](#); [24:18](#)). It was not as if Jesus’ audience suddenly suffered amnesia. It is unclear whether they were willfully disregarding their collective history as a people who once lived in bondage, or if they were expressing their own personal status of having never been in bondage themselves. In either case, their declaration showed a failure to follow what Moses had commanded of Israel. But perhaps more significantly, their declaration was a failure to remember their dependence on God.

This narrative includes all 11 references to Abraham in John’s Gospel. These references are often an appeal to Abraham as a means to reject the teachings of Jesus (see [John 8:39, 52–57](#)). The claim to be of *Abraham’s* lineage was true but lacked perspective regarding what was relatively more important (see [Luke 3:8–9](#)). An appeal to physical ancestry revealed a failure to grasp the nature of the kingdom of God about which Jesus taught.

What Do You Think?

What reasons might nonbelievers give to avoid following Jesus’ teaching?

Digging Deeper

What excuses do Christians use to avoid following Jesus’ teaching? How might [Matthew 16:24](#) address these excuses?

B. Question (v. 33b)

33b. “How can you say that we shall be set free?”

The Jews questioned Jesus, placing the burden of proof on him. Their question implied that they believed they were currently *free*, which disregarded their current status in the Roman Empire. They also failed to realize that Jesus was concerned with a different kind of freedom.

III. Jesus Responds

([JOHN 8:34–38](#))

A. Sin and Servitude (v. 34)

34. Jesus replied, “Very truly I tell you, everyone who sins is a slave to sin.”

Jesus’ response instantly upended the Jewish audience’s faulty understandings of bondage and freedom. While they were concerned with an earthly sense of bondage, Jesus spoke of a more important form. Jesus applied the bondage metaphor to *everyone who sins*. Such a person was a *slave to sin*. The ironic aspect was that it was one’s own sinful desires that bound a person.

Other New Testament texts continue the bondage theme when discussing the influence of sin. The apostle Paul wrote that the bondage of sin leads to death ([Romans 6:6, 16–17](#)). Therefore, to find freedom, people should seek to become “slaves to righteousness” ([6:18](#)). The apostle Peter warned against false promises of freedom that led people to become “slaves of depravity” ([2 Peter 2:19](#)).

SMOKE AND MIRRORS

The boredom had become too much for sixteen-year-old me to handle. I had to do something to pass the time. “Why not? What’s the big deal?” I said to myself as I lit my first cigarette. A practice that I intended to pass the time with grew into something larger. As I got older, smoking had a bigger hold on me. I planned my days around each cigarette and each smoke break. When asked, I was quick to dismiss my habit. Everybody smoked, and I thought I could quit at any time.

In reality, I was addicted to cigarettes. Their influence took over my life and affected my health, my job, and my relationships. Often I would rather be late to work than forgo my cigarettes. I was bound captive to a smoking habit I couldn’t drop.

People can be bound captive by unchecked sin. Enticing sin seems innocent. It seduces people into believing it’s not a big deal—when in fact it brings death. Sin might seem innocent and justified. But the longer you continue in it, the more likely it will send your freedom up in smoke. Don’t deceive yourself! Who will you confess your sins to today (see [1 John 1:8–10](#))?

—P. L. M.

Are YOU free?



Visual for [Lesson 8](#). Have this visual on display as you pose the discussion question that is associated with [John 8:36](#).

B. Temporary and Permanent (v. 35)

35. “Now a slave has no permanent place in the family, but a son belongs to it forever.

Jesus continued his response to his Jewish audience through the use of a household metaphor. In a wealthy person’s household, a *slave* would work for the master. However, even as a part of *the family*, a servant’s presence was uncertain, as he or she could be sold or set free at any time.

By contrast, the master’s firstborn *son* and heir received all the safety, security, and economic advantage of the family. No matter the situation, the son was considered a permanent member of the household and received the blessing of the inheritance to future generations (see [Genesis 21:10](#); [Ezekiel 46:16](#)). Jesus pointed his hearers to find permanent freedom from sin through the Son of God and the promise of his inheritance.

C. Son and Freedom (v. 36)

36. “So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed.

A primary descriptor of Jesus in John’s Gospel is *Son* of God. The title highlights the unique relationship Jesus has with his Father, who sent him (John 3:16, 18; 5:19). The title stressed the Son’s deity even while he was on earth (5:20–25). As the Son of God, Jesus is the source of eternal life (5:26). The Son and the Father are one (14:10–11), and they give glory to each other (17:1).

Jesus taught that only he can set people *free* from sin. His audience misunderstood the implications of his teaching concerning the Son and his Father (see John 8:19, 27). With the proclamation in the verse before us, Jesus identified himself with the “truth” (see commentary on 8:32, above) who would bring freedom from condemnation and death (3:18; 5:24).

What Do You Think?

How does the Son’s freedom differ from worldly ideas of freedom?

Digging Deeper

How do Romans 6:22; Galatians 5:1–13; James 1:25–27; and 1 Peter 2:16–17 affect your answer in this regard?

FIXING STITCHES

Spending hours crocheting with my mom is one of the fondest (and most frustrating!) memories of my childhood. She sat with me and taught me each stitch. Anytime I missed a stitch, I would unravel the yarn and fix the missed spot. Sometimes I would make another mistake in the process of fixing the original mistake! I spent so much time fixing mistakes that I often didn’t fully enjoy the final product!

Constantly fixing mistakes is how I once perceived my life with God: if I didn’t make mistakes with my life, then I would be right with God. But it felt like mistakes were unavoidable, one occurring right after another.

Jesus’ audience thought their law, their history, and their actions made them free and right with God. However, they were in bondage. The truth that provides freedom is found in Jesus. There are no mistakes that are too much for Jesus. Are you trying to fix the “missed stitches” of your life? Or, instead, have you accepted the freedom that Jesus brings? How will you use your freedom in Christ for the good of others (see Galatians 5:13)?

—P. L. M.

D. What and Why (vv. 37–38)

37a. “I know that you are Abraham’s descendants.

Jesus confirmed his audience’s earlier assertion that they were *Abraham’s descendants* (see commentary on [John 8:33](#), above). However, a valid claim to Abrahamic lineage was not enough. Jesus would remind his audience that “if you were Abraham’s children ... you would do what Abraham did” ([8:39](#)). True children of Abraham followed in the faith of Abraham (see [Romans 4:3, 12](#)). As a result, the people of God expand beyond the scope of an ethnic identification with Abraham (see [9:6–8](#)).

37b. “Yet you are looking for a way to kill me, because you have no room for my word.

Not only did Jesus’ audience refuse to listen to his teaching; they conspired against him. This is not the first time Jesus acknowledged this desire in his audience. Previously, he asked the Jews at the temple courts: “Why are you trying *to kill me*” ([John 7:19](#)). In that instance the crowds refused to answer Jesus directly, preferring instead to question the validity of his question, stating that he was possessed ([7:20](#)). As a result of their indirect answer, Jesus assumed that they were indeed seeking to kill him. True disciples would make *room for the word* of Jesus, which bore witness to the Father who sent the Son ([5:36–40](#)).

38. “I am telling you what I have seen in the Father’s presence, and you are doing what you have heard from your father.”

Jesus pronounced a contrast. On the one hand, Jesus’ word gave witness to his heavenly Father who sent him. On the other hand, Jesus observed that his audience was more concerned with what they *have heard from their father*, the devil (see [John 8:44](#)).

Jesus’ audience thought that their freedom was inevitable because of their ancestry. However, Jesus stated that they were deceived. As long as they refused to listen and adhere to the teaching of Jesus, they would not experience true freedom. They would not know their heavenly Father. By failing to heed Jesus, the audience failed to listen to God.

What Do You Think?

How might the actions and concerns of Christians change as they follow God the Father?

Digging Deeper

Do [Luke 10:27–28](#) and [John 14:15](#) give insight to the actions necessary to follow God?

VII. Conclusion

A. True Freedom

Modern discussions regarding the concept of freedom revolve around ideas of personal volition, responsibility, and the ability of people to express themselves without interference. But Jesus was less concerned with freedom in that regard. Instead, Jesus was concerned about

freedom and liberation from the insidious grip of sin. Jesus’ audience did not realize that they were experiencing this kind of bondage. While they thought their ethnic heritage provided freedom, they were actually experiencing bondage. Their so-called freedom was an illusion based on a lie.

Jesus spoke truth because he spoke the words of his Father—a declaration of true freedom. Freedom that comes from the Father leads to eternal life with the Son. Those who crave this freedom will seek Jesus and his Word and become his disciples. As such, his disciples will know the truth, and the truth will set them free. A new day of freedom has been established.

B. Prayer

Heavenly Father, give us ears to hear your truth and hearts that love your truth. May our attitudes, words, and actions reflect your truth so we can bear witness to your Son. May the world be illuminated by your truth shining in and through us. In Jesus’ name. Amen.

C. Thought to Remember

Freedom is found in the truth of Jesus.

INVOLVEMENT LEARNING

Enhance your lesson with NIV Bible Student (from your curriculum supplier) and the reproducible activity page (at www.standardlesson.com or in the back of the NIV Standard Lesson Commentary Deluxe Edition).

Into the Lesson

Bring a ball of string to class. Before class, write on strips of paper 10 simple tasks that can be done in the classroom. (These tasks might include gathering certain items, cleaning parts of the room, or moving small furniture.) Place the strips of paper in a bowl. Ask for four volunteers from the class. Place the volunteers in two teams of two people. Using the string, tie together team members’ legs and arms, as for a three-legged race. Each team will have three “legs” and three “arms.”

At your signal, have each team draw a task from the bowl and complete the task. Once a team completes a task, they are to draw another task from the bowl and complete it. The first team to complete five tasks is declared the winner.

After a winner is declared, use scissors to cut everyone free. Ask teams, “How did being tied up limit what your team was able to do?” Invite team members to share their feelings

about being entangled and restricted. Of the rest of the class, ask: 1–What made teams successful in completing the tasks? 2–What made teams unsuccessful in completing the tasks? 3–What real-life scenarios might this situation parallel?

After this activity, say, “We have all experienced the bondage of sin—and no matter what we do, we cannot free ourselves from it. Sin’s bondage makes it hard for us to follow God’s direction for our lives. Today’s lesson will direct our focus to the only one who can truly make us free.”

Into the Word

Ask a volunteer to read aloud [John 8:31–32](#). Divide the whole class into four equal groups: **“Teaching” Group / “Disciples” Group / “Truth” Group / “Free” Group**. Give each group a paper and pen. Ask each group to study these verses, focusing on the significance of their word in these verses. Then each group is to write a dictionary entry for their word, based on its usage in these verses. The entry should include its part of speech, its definition, and an example sentence. Allow no more than five minutes to complete.

After the groups complete their entry, invite a representative from each group to share their entry with the class. Write these two verses on the board, but replace these four words with the groups’ definitions. Ask the class the following questions: 1–How, if at all, do these definitions add clarity to the original verses? 2–How, if at all, do these definitions change the main point of the original verses? 3–How, if at all, has your understanding of these verses changed, based on these definitions?

Give each group a new term: **“Abraham’s descendants” / “slave” / “Son” / “Father.”** Ask groups to use the same papers as before and write down answers to the following questions: 1–To whom does this role refer? 2–What are the rights of this role in relation to the others? 3–What are the responsibilities of this role in relation to the others? 4–How, if at all, has your understanding of these verses changed, based on these answers?

Alternative. Distribute to each group a copy of the “Roles and Expectations” exercise from the activity page, which you can download. Have groups complete the activity as indicated.

Into Life

Ask the class to brainstorm ways sin subjugates both Christians and non-Christians, as well as ways Jesus gives freedom from sin. List responses on the board. Ask the class to brainstorm ways that Christians can abide in Jesus and his teaching, and thus better enjoy and exemplify his freedom. Ask learners to write down what steps they will take in their own lives to continually abide in Jesus.

Alternative. Distribute to each learner a copy of the “Word Web” activity page. Encourage everyone to complete the activity at home, as directed, and be prepared to share with the class at the start of next week’s time together.