

5 Obstacles to Freedom in Christ

When I was 18 years old, I surrendered to God's call to vocational ministry. But I really had no idea what I was surrendering to. Some years later, God gave me a mandate: "I sent my Son to set the captives free. You will go forth and ring the liberty bell."

This mandate sounded evangelistic to me, and I was certain my calling was in the area of discipleship. I shake my head and marvel now when I recall that I once thought the only people who were captives were the spiritually lost!

But if anyone had told me then that Christians can be in bondage, I would have argued with all the volume a person can muster—when a yoke of slavery is strangling her neck! I was the worst kind of captive: a prisoner unaware. In fact, I had no idea I was in captivity until God began to set me free.

Perhaps you're also unconvinced that Christians can live in bondage. Don't take my word for it; take God's.

The Bible says: "It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery" (Gal. 5:1, NIV, emphasis added). The fact that Paul wrote this warning not to the world but to the church (see Gal. 1:2) and that he used the phrase "burdened again" indicates that he knew it was possible for believers to become bound.

I paraphrase Galatians 5:1 this way: "Don't you realize that Christ gave up everything so you could be free? The cross purchased your liberty from every yoke and replaced it with Christ Himself [see Matt. 11:28-30]. Nothing can hold you captive now without your permission."

“Don’t go back to slavery! He did not set you free to live the rest of your life in self-inflicted bondage. Learn to live in Christ’s glorious liberty; then stay on the alert so you don’t return to captivity.”

END OF CAPTIVITY No other book of the Bible has more to say about the captivity of God’s people and the promise of freedom and restoration than the book of Isaiah. Isaiah ministered as a prophet to the people of God in and around Jerusalem during the period when the nation of Israel was a divided kingdom. Isaiah’s name means “The Lord Saves,” and the word “salvation” is used in his book 27 times—twice as many as in the books of the other Old Testament prophets combined.

Isaiah speaks about the rebellion of God’s people and their resulting captivity to the Assyrians. But he also looks ahead to a time when the captivity will end, a time when Israel will be comforted by God and restored to her appointed purpose.

More importantly, Isaiah prophesies about the coming of the Deliverer, the One who is destined to set His people free:

“The Spirit of the Sovereign Lord is on Me, because the Lord has anointed Me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent Me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor and the day of vengeance of our God, to comfort all who mourn, and provide for those who grieve in Zion—to bestow on them a crown of beauty instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, and a garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair.

“They will be called oaks of righteousness, a planting of the Lord for the display of His splendor. They will rebuild the ancient ruins and restore the places long devastated; they will renew the ruined cities that have been devastated for generations” (Is. 61:1-4).

From this passage we can learn several important points:

God hears the cry of the oppressed. We must believe that God cares about those in physical, emotional, mental or spiritual prisons. God issued Isaiah 61:1-4 as a response to the captivity He foresaw when He looked down on rebellious Judah. These liberating words apply to us just as surely as they did to the Israelites. They will continue to apply as long as God looks down from the height of His sanctuary, views the earth and hears the groaning of the prisoner.

God fulfills Isaiah 61:1-4 in Christ alone. When Jesus read from the Scriptures in the temple, He quoted Isaiah 61 as His personal charter (see Luke 4:14-21). Both Isaiah 61:1 and Luke 4:14 tell us that Christ Jesus was empowered by the Spirit. And we know that "where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom" (2 Cor. 3:17).

Christ sets us free by the power of His Spirit; then He maintains our freedom as we learn to live from day to day in the power of that Spirit. Isaiah and Luke agree that only Christ was appointed to offer this kind of freedom.

Christ's ministry is a ministry of the heart. Do you notice all the parts of Jesus' job description? Christ came to "bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the comfort all who bestow on them a crown of beauty instead of garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair" (Is. 61:1-3).

Christ's first priority is setting captives free from the bondage of eternal destruction (see 2 Pet. 3:9). But saved people, as I mentioned before, can still be in bondage (see Gal. 5:1).

FORMS OF BONDAGE What does this mean in real life? When I think of bondage, I most often imagine yokes that come from some area of childhood trauma or victimization because this is the kind of yoke I had to combat. However, I know from my relationships with other women that there are many different

types of yokes.

I recently asked a group of women I teach to broaden my horizon in terms of areas of captivity believers face. Although they will remain unnamed, you know women just like them: bright, educated, Christian women who serve faithfully in their churches and come from all economic backgrounds.

I heard painful testimonies of bondage to lust and patterns of falling into sexual sin. I read about struggles with homosexuality and a fear of men because of childhood abuse.

Some spoke about an inability to love people fully, including their own husbands and children. One wrote me about the victory God had given her over a compulsion to steal. Another had been freed from habitual dishonesty. A friend surprised me by writing about gaining freedom from the bitterness she had developed as a result of the physical abuse she endured as a child.

My heart broke for one woman who described how deep insecurity had stolen friendships, church work and her marriage from her. I've heard from many who were held captive by a critical and judgmental heart toward people. Others wrestled terribly with anger toward God. Doubt. Discouragement. Loneliness. A chronic lack of satisfaction.

And these letters came only from those who had already found freedom in Christ. Imagine how many are still struggling! I firmly believe:

- Christ came to set the captives free—no matter what kind of yoke binds them.
- He came to bind up the brokenhearted—no matter what broke the heart.
- He came to open the eyes of the blind—no matter what veiled their vision.

OBSTACLES TO FREEDOM In Isaiah's glorious thesis on captives

set free, the prophet describes the benefits of God in one unforgettable summation: "Since ancient times no one has heard, no ear has perceived, no eye has seen any God besides you, who acts on behalf of those who wait for Him" (Is. 64:4). God wants to do in your life what your eyes have never seen, your ears have never heard, and your mind has never conceived.

But just as the Israelites were in bondage, a foreign yoke may be keeping you from realizing five primary benefits that God intends for His children to enjoy. The absence of any one benefit is a helpful indicator of captivity. According to the Book of Isaiah, God graciously extended the following benefits to His children:

- To know God and believe Him
- To glorify God
- To find satisfaction in God
- To experience God's peace
- To enjoy God's presence

Since many Christians today obviously are not experiencing the fullness of these benefits, there must be hindrances that keep us from the birthright God intends. Five obstacles block our access to the benefits God has for us:

- Unbelief, which hinders knowing God
- Pride, which prevents us from glorifying God
- Idolatry, which keeps us from being satisfied with God
- Prayerlessness, which blocks our experience of God's peace
- Legalism, which stops our enjoyment of God's presence

These five obstacles are so prohibitive that if they are not addressed and removed the personal visitation of our King will be greatly hindered, and we will never walk in true freedom.

Unbelief. Unbelief is choosing not to believe God. I'm not talking about believing in God; I'm talking about believing what He says. We can believe in Christ, accepting the truth

that He is the Son of God, and we can believe on Christ, receiving eternal salvation, yet fail to stand firm in belief and choose to find Him trustworthy day to day.

Unbelief is crippling. The steps we take forward with God we take through faith. Therefore, unbelief literally cripples our spiritual "walk," casting huge obstacles in the way of a victorious life.

The good news is that if we're willing to admit our lack of confidence in Him, Christ is more than willing to help us overcome our unbelief. Ask Him to do this for you. Also, spend time getting to know Him. The more you know Him, the more you will believe Him. Choose today to pursue Him and to walk in faith.

Pride. Pride is an obstacle to glorifying God because it is equivalent to taking God off the throne and putting ourselves in His place. We cannot honor Him when we are seeking honor for ourselves. And God will not share His glory with another, not even His own children.

Breaking free from pride involves two steps: (1) viewing pride as a vicious enemy and humility as a friend; and (2) humbling yourself before God. Proverbs 11:2 tells us, "When pride comes, then comes disgrace, but with humility comes wisdom."

Humility is not something we have until humbling ourselves is something we do. This does not mean we are to hate ourselves. It means we are to acknowledge who we are in relationship to God and bow to His majesty.

Idolatry. God wants us to find our satisfaction in Him rather than wasting our time and effort on things that cannot satisfy. But when we look to other sources for satisfaction, we are guilty of idolatry.

Dissatisfaction is not a terrible thing. It's a God-thing.

It's only terrible when we don't let it lead us to Christ. He wants us to find the only thing that will truly satiate our thirsty and hungry hearts.

To travel forward on the road to freedom, we must remove the obstacle of idolatry. But this is not always easy.

The first two obstacles to freedom—unbelief and pride—can be removed effectively by a matter of choice: we can choose to believe God, and we can choose to humble ourselves before God. Some of the idols in our lives, however, are more difficult to remove because they have been in place for years, and we find it difficult to let them go. We begin by choosing to recognize their existence and admitting their inability to keep us satisfied.

Prayerlessness. Avoiding prayer is a sure prescription for anxiety. To experience the kind of peace that covers all circumstances and live powerful lives, we must develop active, authentic prayer lives.

Prayerlessness is the most prohibitive obstacle in the road to a believer's victory. When Satan attacks, we can't rely on discipline, lessons we've learned in the past or our knowledge of what is best for us to bring us through.

Our strongest motivation will be the Person with whom we walk. Staying close to Him through constant communication, we receive a continual supply of strength to walk victoriously.

Legalism. God gave a perfect description of legalism in Isaiah 29:13: "These people come near to Me with their mouth and honor Me with their lips, but their hearts are far from Me. Their worship of Me is made up only of rules taught by men."

We must understand that we cannot please God—or find the freedom we seek—by following a set of rules. God does not take our spiritual temperature under our tongues by the words we say, or in our ears by the impressive teachings we hear, or

under our arms by the service we perform. God takes our spiritual temperature straight from the heart. He wants us to exchange our regulations for relationship with Him.

If any of these obstacles is keeping you from walking in the abundant life Christ came to give you, remember: God's specialty is rolling away stones! Allow Him to put His hand on what is holding you captive and shove it out of the way so you can experience total freedom in Him.

Read a companion devotional.

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