

Set Free

Ephesians 1:3-14 January 3, 2021

A football game between The University of Georgia & the University of Texas. Georgia wasn't moving the ball. In the third quarter they didn't have a single first down. They were backed up near their own end zone. Suddenly, on third & 10, the young third-string quarterback ran onto the field. No one had told him to go into the game. But, no one tried to stop him either. The A-string QB saw his substitute number and assumed the coach was replacing him, so he trotted off the field. This bench-warmer led the team down the field for a touchdown and the rest is history, as they say.

Fran Tarkenton was the third string quarterback on Georgia's team with no prospect of advancing. He went on to become the scrambling quarterback of the Minnesota Vikings and one of the most prolific passers in NFL history.

How could a player on a major college team be so brazen as to substitute himself? He felt his destiny had come. He was chosen for that moment. That sure knowledge set him free. — King Duncan, *Dynamic Preaching*

The good news for us at the beginning of 2021 is that God has set us free. How does such freedom come? Paul tells us. “[God] chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before him in love.”

“God destined us for adoption,” Paul writes, “as his children through Jesus Christ.”

The words “in Christ” appear 10 times in the book of Ephesians. “In Christ” we become children of God. In God's great realm there are no grandchildren, there are no step-children, there are no illegitimate children, because each of us is a child of God “in Christ”. We are set free. We are chosen. There is great freedom in a feeling of chosenness.

Today is a great day for letting go of the bones of the past. God created us with eyes in the front of our heads so that if we tried to look back we would get a stiff neck. The possibilities of the future call us to look forward.

We are set free, because our sins are forgiven!

Paul is a powerful example. Paul wrote, (1 Corinthians 15:9-10) “For I am the least of the apostles, unfit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. But by the grace of God, I am what I am.” Even though Paul once persecuted the church, through the grace of God he was forgiven and given another chance. With this new life, Paul set out proclaiming the message of salvation to Jews and Gentiles alike.

Christians proclaim the good news of forgiveness in God's love for the world.

Willie Nelson recalls his boyhood days attending a small church. “I was one of those kids who kept down to the front when the preacher called for converts at the end of each sermon,” Nelson wrote. “I'd see somebody next to me start to the front, and, well, there I'd go again. I joined that Church at least thirty times. Every time I'd do something bad, I'd walk down to the front and renounce my sins and ask Jesus Christ to come into my heart. And all of a sudden I had a new slate in the eyes of the Church. Then I'd slip off and smoke a long strip of cedar bark rolled up in a newspaper — and suddenly I was back in the fiery furnace again.”

“Each time I went to the front and rededicated my life,” Nelson writes, “I wanted to leave my sins with God and walk away clean. I felt I shouldn't have gotten off so easy. I mean, the Church had let me off, but I hadn't let myself off.” — Willie: *An Autobiography*, Willie Nelson with

Sometimes the hardest person to forgive is yourself. You are set free in Christ. You are forgiven through Christ.

You are set free when you realize that you are not trapped by the past. Sometimes we get stuck because we remember and relive old painful memories. We get stuck and become paralyzed by old bones.

On Johnny Carson's farewell program in 1972, he introduced his family in the audience. Except a son who had been killed in an accident the year before. Johnny said, "Life does what it's supposed to...then you move on."

Some think last year was the worst year ever. The economy closed down. Many got sick. People lost jobs. Many lost money. Many had to cope with less income & more stress.

Maybe your candidate lost the election. A death might have left your family hurting & grieving. Maybe COVID 19 filled you with fear. Whatever happened to you in 2020, 2021 is a time to get free from the past & start over.

NEW BEGINNINGS ARE POSSIBLE.

Early in the 12th century in a valley near Lausanne, France, young Bernard was robbed and held for ransom. The crime was nothing new to the province. The valley was known as Wormwood because of the bitter sufferings sustained by the victims of the outlaws who controlled the land.

The kidnap victim was an orphan. His father was a Knight who lost his life in the First Crusade. His mother also died when he was young. He could have given up.

Legend says Bernard was forced to entertain his captors. Instead, he shared with them his hope in the one who is the Light of the World. His testimony so moved them that they set him free.

This young man entered the Cistercian Order and became a minister and a great scholar. He gathered others around him who shared his concern for the poor, and they established hostels where travelers could find shelter and safety. The first of these was built in the Valley of Darkness, Wormwood.

Some of the men who had held the young man captive helped him build the retreat. They called it Clairvaux. Bernard became known as Bernard of Clairvaux -- Bernard of the Valley of Light.

He reflected the light of Jesus Christ and he illuminated the darkness by that light. The darkness has been defeated. And it is being defeated daily by the countless followers who shed light in the dark world that sometimes seems to have gone mad. Frakes, EMPHASIS, 1-93, p. 13

Bernard of Clairvaux was orphaned, robbed, held captive for ransom. He could have given in, given up.

Yet today we recognize him as the composer of 5 hymns in our hymnal, (116/117, 316, 356, 489, 537) the organizer of the Second Crusade, & founder of the two hostels in Switzerland famous for their dogs named for him, the St. Bernards.

It was a time of new beginnings. New beginnings for Wormwood, the valley of Darkness. New beginnings for the thieves and kidnappers. A new beginning for St. Bernard. He was set free from the bones of the past.

Praise God they had a church that proclaimed grace and forgiveness for all sinners!

We, too, are set free. We are set free! We are chosen. We are forgiven. It's a New Beginning.

Lord you chose us to say no to whatever makes it more difficult to say yes to you.

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