

How is it possible for so many whom the world seeks to imprison with illness, grief or unfairness find a way to live with hope and joy? And how is it that at the same time, there are so many free from earthly barriers but remain imprisoned by anger, selfishness, or depression? It doesn't make sense! And yet the trouble with the bars of any prison is that sometimes we forget which side is which.

Jonah was reluctant to do what God asked but successful anyway. Nineveh was so evil and such an enemy he harbored no desire to waste time on them. And they were gentiles to boot! When they repented, he resented that God spared their lives! No way did they deserve his time, or such love.

Jonah was angry and accused God of stacking the deck. Apparently he didn't take kindly to the fish motel he had been confined in, *and yet in that prison is where Jonah finally turned around and took part in his missionary call.* Having been set free, he instead placed himself behind bars of self-pity and jealousy because of God's love for the people of Nineveh.

Paul, on the other hand, eagerly preached to anyone who would listen, and was constantly thrown behind bars for threatening the status quo. From a prison in Rome he wrote to the Philippians and rejoiced in the freedom that allowed share his faith, even behind bars! What irony there is in these two stories ... Jonah was free as a bird but felt trapped while Paul was confined behind bars, but celebrated his freedom in Christ!

How does that work for us? When are we confined with no hope of escape and when are we truly free, no matter what? Just as it is painful to watch someone devastated by illness and death, it is more so to see a healthy person trapped by anger, grief, or the need to control others.

Paul was so worn out by "jail time" he considered how much better it would be to die and join Christ in heaven. But his faith reminded him, that even in prison, he was free to celebrate Easter and share that faith with those around him.

Now, should it be any different for us? Sin erects barriers and shuts doors, and sometimes we even help. But the gift of forgiveness and God's remarkable grace offers life and freedom no matter which side of earth's prison bars we find ourselves on. We do have a choice – will we be prisoners or free?

One day Peter told Jesus, "We've given up more than anyone to follow you. What is our reward?" In response, Jesus lovingly told a story about a generous master who gave the same wages to every worker, whether they began early in the morning or late in the afternoon.

His point was to tell Peter, "*what more can I give you than the gift of ME?*" Jesus had set his disciples free, and yet they were in danger of imprisoning themselves again with judgment, jealousy, and pride.

It's like the grass always being greener on the other side of the fence ... no matter which side of the fence we find ourselves on. That is the brokenness of sin, which began in the garden when Adam and Eve said, "certainly God must be holding back!"

But appearances can be deceiving, as Satan found out on Easter morning. He thought he had trapped Jesus in an inescapable tomb, but Jesus proclaimed even death becomes a place of freedom and infinite life and joy! That is the Gospel. That is our good news!

Paul says we always have a choice. No matter what our circumstances or what life brings our way, we can decide whether to live as prisoner or free.

Thinking about Jonah's predicament (which often sounds like ours) Frederick Bueckner wrote *"When God ordered him to go to Nineveh and tell them there to shape up and get saved, the expression on Jonah's face was that of a man who has just gotten a whiff of septic-tank trouble. In the first place, the Ninevites were foreigners and thus off his beat. In the second place, far from wanting to see them get saved, nothing would have pleased him more than to see them get what he thought they had coming to them.*

*It was as the result of a desperate attempt to get himself out of the assignment that he got himself swallowed by the whale instead; but the whale couldn't stomach him for long, and in the end Jonah went ahead and, with a little more prodding from God, did what he'd been told. He hated every minute of it, however, and when the Ninevites succumbed to his eloquence and promised to shape up, he sat down under a leafy castor oil plant to shade him from the blistering sun and smoldered inwardly. It was an opening that God could not resist.<sup>1</sup>"*

Either the brokenness of sin holds us down or the freedom of the Gospel brings light to any darkness and freedom to any barrier. Like the Master who paid every worker at the end of the day, he says to us, *"Take what I have given you and go!"*

Life isn't perfect. Sometimes we will be free as a bird and life will be just the way we want and other times we will be knocked down or trapped behind illness, selfishness, fear, or even death. But always we are tied to Christ who says, "You are forgiven, you are loved, you are alive with me forever – celebrate the joy of this new life and my perfect love!"

The gift of grace is a "get out of jail free card" that can never be taken away and will work no matter what. Why would we ever ignore that gift or not smile when we realize the love behind it?

While in the seminary, I refereed a basketball game inside a prison. The other referee and I were locked inside the gym with a team of outsiders, a team of prisoners, and the bleachers were full of the other inmates of that institution. I share that only as an example of how often truly free people can feel anything but free – and you know what I mean!

Sin does the same thing. When Jonah fled on a ship, he thought he was free but it took the confinement in the belly of a great fish to discover his real source of freedom. Paul was confined in prison but celebrated his freedom in Christ.

Like prisoners who don't learn and wind up back in prison, Jonah ends with him becoming perilously close to getting on the wrong side of the fence -- again! What a great ending that is because it is so much like our lives with the tension of sin that seeks to pull us away from God.

The three days of Good Friday through Easter rewrites the tale of Jonah, but with a perfect ending — which in fact, is just the beginning. Or to tell it another way, in Christ fairness and freedom are not as important as Faith!

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<sup>1</sup> Frederick Buechner. "Peculiar Treasures."

Without Christ you are always behind bars – but in Christ you are always free. We have been given a tremendous gift of grace and our call is now to “Go, take what is ours, and be on our way!” That is true peace! Amen.