

GLENWOOD COMMUNITY CHURCH

September 13, 2020

Set Free by Christ

Acts 25:23-26:32

Pastor Paul Jackson

[music: "This is Amazing Grace"]

[video]

Well, discipleship is really the heart of what it means to be the Church, and it's how God has designed for us to grow and designed for us to be developed as Christians and be conformed in the image of Christ. So we're excited about discipleship at Glenwood and all the ways that's going to take shape in a lot of different ministries. Discipleship groups at Glenwood are a place where you can dig deeper into God's word.

The more time you spend in the Word, the more time you want to spend in the Word. It's just, being in organized Bible study makes it so much easier to have that daily walk with the Lord.

And sometimes the questions that come up encourage me to dig deeper in my own quiet time, and maybe come back the next week with, "Hey, I think I understand this better. What do you think?"

When you grow more as a result of seeing what someone else saw in Scripture, I think that just increases your desire for that community.

This is an opportunity for us, this Covid season. The Lord has seen fit to allow this to happen to the church, and so we have a way forward. Discipleship groups at Glenwood are a place where you can learn how to grow in prayer.

One of the things that we do see is that, as a group that spends some time together and the depth of understanding of each other and the trust that you have grows, that then prayer requests become, in some cases, very deep and meaningful.

Not only does it bring us all closer to one another and closer to the Lord, but it just keeps building relationships; it makes people want to come back; it makes people feel like they have a safe place.

We know what struggles people are having, and as we continue to share, we're more willing to open up and to share some of the issues that are really troubling us.

It's going to be happening in student ministries. It's going to be happening in men's and women's. I just appeal to you and encourage you to think in terms of "how can I do this?" Not waiting for discipleship to happen, or not waiting for Covid to be over, now is a perfect time to jump in and partner with the Church and with what God is doing here at Glenwood to grow and to help others grow. Discipleship groups are a place where you can be ministered to, and you can minister to others.

It's really awesome to get into small groups with students and see them start to form bonds with one another. I think that's where you get to start to see students - older students, more mature students - mentoring younger ones. And you can see some of that even just between a couple grades; I think you see the teaching and leading

In one of my discipleship groups we had one student that was--came from a little bit of a rougher home and wasn't able to come as often as he would like. But the times that he was able to come, we were really able to dive deep into the Word and the Scriptures and get to know him really well. And just his demeanor, his willingness to share, and his willingness to be himself really opened up.

A while ago I was let go from my job, and our small group and our church community was able to support us through six months of unemployment, and the prayers and the physical support was just overwhelming.

There would be groceries on our front porch; there would be money in the mail. One of the pastors came over and prayed for us, but it was the care-people really loved on us, and we knew that.

The support just gives you a feeling of confidence and support that I don't think I would have found anywhere else.

A simple way to get involved would be going to our website, glenwoodcc.org/discipleship, and from there we can send you into a multitude of directions to plug into discipleship in all the different ministry formats here at Glenwood. So God is at work, Glenwood, and He's doing things right now. So let's not wait, let's jump in. How are you going to get involved with discipleship at Glenwood?

Pastor Nathan:

Oh yeah! There you go; we made a video! Welcome, it's so good to be here with you this morning, and welcome to those of you who are joining us online. As you have heard, and now you've just seen in a very nice video, we are doing discipleship at Glenwood. And we're using this opportunity during Covid to go deep. And if you want to find out more about each of those opportunities, from student all the way to adult ministries, you can find out more by going to our website. Also, there may be a unique discipleship opportunity after service today, because there is a gray Corolla out in the parking lot with the lights on. So, you should check it out. It's just right out here; the first three on the license plate are B-U-V. So if that's you, I'm about to pray and you can sneak out then. Otherwise, we'll come help you after service. Will you pray with me?

Father, we count it an incredible privilege to be able to call You that: You are our Father. By the blood of Your own Son, You made a way that we could be Your sons and your daughters. You brought us from the kingdom of darkness into the kingdom of light. Thank you, Father. Jesus, Your power and Your majesty are unrivaled. You're Lord of all, and we'll sing those words in just a few moments. And even in Your power, You came and walked among us. You showed us what true humility and grace look like. Thank You for showing us what it looks like to sacrifice and to give for the good of others. Father, we ask today that You would strengthen us in our inner being by Your Spirit. That this incredible love and humility and sacrifice that we have come to know through the death of Your Son, Father, we ask that it might flow from the inside out to the people in our lives, to our family, to our neighbors, to our coworkers, to our friends. Father, we ask that today You would help us to continue to grow and see how we can use our resources, our time, our influence, our position to take Your truth and Your hope and Your love wherever You call us in the broken world. Father, we think especially today of those who are in harm's way, who are serving others. We pray for those you are displaced by the fires. God, would You bring Your comfort and hope that we find in Jesus Christ, and would You help Your church to be able to serve and point people to Your goodness in this time. Thank You that we can gather together today to remember and celebrate your goodness to us. Amen

Ben Rico:

Amen, He is good to us. Would you stand with us as we sing joyfully because we are welcome before the throne of grace of our Most High God. Let us sing because of the power of Jesus' name that brings us into God's space.

[music: "All Hail the Power of Jesus' Name"]

[music: "King of Kings"]

Amen, amen. Please be seated.

Pastor Paul:

Thank you, Ben. Thank you, Colleen. Nathan made that announcement this morning about a gray Corolla with their lights on in the parking lot, and I thought, "Nathan, do you remember that you have a gray Corolla?" I would have loved that to be the case!

It's been an interesting morning. Ben Rico arrived 5:30 this morning, came in and he confessed to me that on the way here he had to use his GPS to find 119th St. He said he went past it twice. And it is dense out there; it is soupy. The fog and the smoke and all of the particles make for interesting and dangerous driving. In some way it's a metaphor of the gloom that has settled on us, of this surreal vibe that we have experienced in our country and in our city and our place.

Friday afternoon I was coming back from an appointment in East County, and I was at one of our major four-way intersections with multiple lanes, multiple lights, and a semi-truck ran the yellow and had to swing wide because of the trailer and blocked the intersection. Traffic locked up in every direction. It took several turns of the light for people to get through the intersection. It felt like I was in a foreign country, I was in another place, and gave me ample opportunity to think about all of the things that people are experiencing. All those people who had to make hard decisions about "what do you put in the car?" "What do you put in the pick-up" and "can I find my pets" and "can we get away and stay as whole as possible." All the tragic stories that you read about the wildfires. The horrific and increasing violence that some people are perpetrating and experiencing. On top of Covid, with all of its attachments and all the divisions that it causes, of opinion. With an approaching election that has really triggered great emotion in which we need to exercise our responsibility and freedom as citizens to be informed of who God is and what God says, and to vote in ways that are right and true and consistent with Him, that we would be wise as serpents, and as harmless as a dove.

With all that mix of emotion, and all of the anxiety and anger and stuff that people are experiencing in today's world, it's most appropriate for us to open the Word of God. God shines His light into our world. He's shone the light of Christ into a very dark world. A world dominated by cruel and ruthless governments. A world without the Gospel. A world without God. And it's into that world that He sent His Son Jesus Christ, who shines the light of life, who is Word of God, who gives to us Word of God, and who discloses who God is and who we are so that we experience opportunities--or we have experiences like where we're having right now in real time and real world--those experiences reveal to us, as we open the Word of God, more about who He is, about who we are and the work He began in us and the work He still needs to do in us. So that this kind of experience is a prime opportunity for God to continue through His Spirit, His word, His sanctifying power and transforming power, in helping to make and shape us more like Jesus Christ so that we are truly light to our world, that God's light shines in our life and through us to this world.

We're in the book of Acts, mostly Acts 26 this morning. We're going to start, though, in Acts 24. Last week we saw what it looks like to really live. This morning we see what it looks like to be really free, to live free. To live with a robust peace and joy and confidence that only God can give, no matter what the circumstances, no matter how limiting we are, no matter how hard it is or how difficult it is. Last week we were in Acts 20, and the apostle gathered the elders of Ephesus around him and he gave them this final charge and said, "You're not going to see me anymore," and then he's going to go to Jerusalem. This is his last lap, his last lap to the city. He makes the city of Jerusalem. Jerusalem itself, fifteen years later, is going to be totally destroyed by the Emperor Titus. So the people are going about life as if they don't know what's really going to go on, what's going to happen.

And Paul goes back to the city of Jerusalem, and he goes into the temple, and there he offers sacrifices. And then he's recognized, and then he's falsely accused and misrepresented as having violated Jewish law. This creates a riot and a mob of people that come after Paul, and he has to be rescued. He has to be rescued by the

commander of the garrison in the city of Jerusalem, the Roman commander. So the Roman commander has to rescue Paul from this mob. Paul then plays the citizen card early. If you saw in Acts 16, in Phillippi, he's in prison--he doesn't declare he's a Roman citizen until after he's beaten and abused, and then he declares his right of citizenship. Well now, we find that in Jerusalem he declares to the Roman commander his right of citizenship, and he asks to speak to the crowd. He begins to speak to the mob. He declares his innocence of all of their charges against him, and when he gets to the part about Jesus, they go absolutely nuts, and the commander has to take him into protective custody. And then they hear of a plot to take his life, to ambush him, to kill him. And so the Roman commander sends Paul from Jerusalem to Caesarea. Caesarea's on the Mediterranean coast, and it is the nerve center, at the time, of the Roman power in the region. And they send Paul at night with two hundred cavalry and a contingent of foot soldiers to protect him from this plot to ambush Paul on his way to Cesarea. And it is the second time, in a short period, when the Jewish religious leaders try to kill Paul. Well they're not done yet.

So now in Acts 24, we find him in prison in Caesarea. And we find him begin to appear before the first of three different representatives of Rome: before Felix and then Festus and then King Agrippa. And each time he is, in a sense, before his prosecutors, which was a combination of Pharisees and Sadducees who were at disagreement with each other, but they agreed that they had to do away with the apostle Paul. And so these religious power-brokers, they go to Caesarea, and then Paul appears first before Felix. And each one of the people that he appears before, he defends who Jesus Christ is, what God has said, what Paul has done, and has not done, and he proclaims his innocence.

The first hearing is presided over by Felix. And Felix was notorious for his excessive cruelty. In the history books he is noted for the savagery with which he oppressed and suppressed people in the region. So we pick up the account, beginning in Acts 24:24, "*Some days later, Felix arrived with wife Drusilla, his wife who was a Jewess, and sent for Paul and heard him speak about faith in Jesus Christ.*" Felix and Drusilla are an interesting husband and wife. Drusilla was the youngest daughter of Herod Agrippa. We last saw him in Acts 12 when he killed James the

brother of John and he had Peter arrested, thrown in jail, and subsequently he himself died a rather gruesome death. So Drusilla is the youngest daughter of Herod Agrippa. Her great-grandfather was the Herod who ordered the execution of the babies in Bethlehem at the birth of Jesus Christ. Drusilla, youngest of his children, was known as a ravishing beauty. When she was twenty, she left her husband to marry Felix.

Now Paul is standing before the two of them and he's talking about his favorite subject. He's talking about Jesus Christ. So we read in verse 25, "*As he was discussing righteousness, self-control, and the judgment to come, Felix became frightened and said 'Go away for the present, and when I find time I will send for you.'*" So his subject is righteousness. What is right and true and of God? Now, who is he talking to? He's talking to an unrighteous guy who loved to hurt people. And so now, to this guy, Felix, he's sharing about righteousness, the righteousness that comes in and only through Jesus Christ. And he's talking self-control. Whoa. Power of God to work in us, to manage emotion, impulse, anger, bitterness--he's talking about self-control. And he's talking about the judgment to come. So get the picture. He's standing before Felix; he is being judged by Felix. And he tells to Felix, "There is greater judgment by a greater power that no one will escape." So as he speaks of this judgment to come, Felix gets scared. Not just a little bit, he's borderline terrified to the point where he says, "Go away." Periodically, he would bring out Paul to have conversations with him. He also harbored this hope that Paul would pay a bribe, that Paul would line his pockets. But even though Paul was innocent of all charges, as Felix declared, he left him in prison for two more years.

Two years later, the Emperor summoned Felix back to Rome for his excessive cruelty, to account for some of the really horrible things that he did. His replacement was a guy named Festus. And Festus was a welcome relief in comparison to Felix. Well, Festus first went to Jerusalem. He had to clean up the messes that Felix left behind. And when he went to Jerusalem, the Jews and the religious elite, they came to Festus and they told him about the unfinished business sitting in the prison in Caesarea. So it's in Jerusalem that Festus hears about Paul. And the Jews request to Festus that he bring Paul from prison in Caesarea back to

Jerusalem. They planned to kill him on the way, because they can't get to him in Caesarea. Festus doesn't buy it. Instead, he invites the prosecutors to Caesarea. And it's there that Festus goes with the prosecutors, and he invites the apostle again, under trial, to come in before him.

In chapter 25, we read, in verses 9-12. *"But Festus, wishing to do the Jews a favor, answered Paul and said, 'Are you willing to go up to Jerusalem and stand trial before me on these charges?'"* So we're in Caesarea; Festus asks him, "Are you willing to move the location of the trial from here to Jerusalem?" What that would have meant--there's an ambush waiting in an attempt again to kill Paul; Paul's life would have been ended on earth; his mission is not yet complete, he believes the Spirit of God is going to send him and take him to Rome. And so what he does is he exercises his prerogatives as a Roman citizen. Verse 10, *"Paul said, 'I am standing before Caesar's tribunal where I ought to be tried. I have done no wrong to the Jews, as you yourself very well know. If then I am a wrongdoer and have committed anything worthy of death, I do not refuse to die; but if none of those things is true of which these men accuse me, no one can hand me over to them. I appeal to Caesar.'* Then when Festus had conferred with his council, he answered, *'You have appealed to Caesar, to Caesar you'll go.'"*

Well, right after the hearing, Festus is joined by another King. He is joined by a visitor, King Herod, and his sister Bernice. Remember Drusilla? I know this gets confusing; this is like a reality TV show at this point. Drusilla, she, of the ravishing beauty, left her husband to become the wife of Felix--she's the little sister of King Herod, of Herod, of this Herod, of Agrippa; and she is the little sister of Bernice. So Agrippa and Bernice are brother and sister. Later, Bernice would become famous as the mistress of the Emperor Titus, who was the one who destroyed Jerusalem in 70 AD. So he is before some really broken people with a lot of power, who were intoxicated by their power. Well, Agrippa is an expert in Jewish law and Jewish culture. Festus doesn't know nearly as much about the Jews that he's called to govern as does Agrippa or Bernice. And so he tells Agrippa and Bernice about this guy sitting in his jail, in his prison, and he says "I don't have anything on him. He's appealed to Caesar. How am I going to send him to Caesar without charge? We

gotta find some dirt on this guy. And surely you can help me to find something wrong with Paul, so that, when we send him to Caesar, we don't have to send him as an innocent man; we can send him convicted in his guilt."

And so we read in Acts 25, these words, 23-27, *"So, on the next day, when Agrippa came together with Bernice amid great pomp, and entered the auditorium accompanied by the commanders and the prominent men of the city, at the command of Festus, Paul was brought in. Festus said, 'King Agrippa and all you gentlemen here present with us, you see this man about whom all the people of the Jews appealed to me, both at Jerusalem and here, loudly declaring that he ought not to live any longer. But I found he had committed nothing worthy of death; and since he himself appealed to the Emperor, I decided to send him. Yet I have nothing definite about him to write my lord. Therefore I have brought him before you all and especially before you, King Agrippa, so that after the investigation has taken place, I may have something to write. For it seems absurd to me in sending a prisoner, not to indicate also the charges against him.'"* So help me find out what this guy actually did and why we're here and why these people want to kill him.

Paul begins to speak to Agrippa. His opening comments are really full of respect and recognition of Agrippa's familiarity with the Bible, with the Old Testament. And Paul begins to retell his testimony, and he starts with the part of his life story that was famous. Verses 4 and 5, of chapter 26, *"So then, all the Jews know my manner of life from my youth up, which from the beginning was spent among my own nation and at Jerusalem; since they have known about me for a long time, if they're willing to testify, that I lived as a Pharisee according to the strictest sect of our religion."* So first Paul appeals to what they know about him. What they know is that he was voted by his classmates most likely to succeed. What they know about this guy is that he was the star player on the team. They know that this guy has a history where he excelled, and that he was Pharisee of Pharisees. They know his story. They know what he was like before he knew Christ. There's a section of his defense where he admits to injustice that he has committed against followers of Christ. After telling about his own history in Judaism, then he tells about his own sin. As he pursued believers, approved of their execution, persecuted them, sought

followers of Christ, and in the process discovered that, as he was seeking to persecute followers of Jesus Christ, that Jesus Christ was seeking him.

He is pursuing to persecute followers of Christ; we find his conversion repeated yet again, in Acts 26. You know the account. It's familiar to most of us, it's dramatic. Most of us--probably, unlikely any of us came to know Christ through such overt demonstration of God's greatness and glory. There is a light from Heaven that is brighter than the sun, which overwhelmed Paul's central nervous system. It brought him to his knees, flat on his face, humbled before the Light of the world. He's still flat on the ground, he hears a voice - he knew the language; he didn't know the voice - but the Person who spoke the language and who was the voice knew who Paul was and is. Acts 26:14, "*When we had all fallen to the ground, I heard a voice saying to me in the Hebrew dialect, 'Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me? It is hard for you to kick against the goads.'*" A goad was simply a sharp stick that someone used to motivate an animal to go the direction you wanted it to go. It's as if Jesus says, "Saul, I've been calling to you for a long time." The Spirit of God has been reaching into Saul's life, inviting him to Christ, and Saul pushes back; he kicks against the person of Jesus and the work of God. So now Jesus asks him, "Saul, why are you so persistent in rejecting Me and pushing back against Me? Why are you persecuting Me?" To persecute the body of Christ is to persecute Christ Himself. He personalizes, Jesus does, what it looks like when others go after believers.

The apostle then asks Jesus the question, "*Who are you Lord?*" in verse 15; and the Lord said, "*I am Jesus whom you are persecuting.*" And then Jesus speaks these life-giving words in the form of command. Verse 16, "*Get up. Stand on your feet; for this purpose I have appeared to you, to appoint you a minister and a witness not only to things which you have seen, but also to the things which I will appear to you.*" So you have a new life purpose, Paul. You have a new mission in life, and that is to represent who Jesus is and what Jesus has said, but also to what Jesus will say and what Paul will experience as he obeys Him around the next corner, over the next hill. Verse 17, He's going to rescue him from the Jewish people and from the

Gentiles, and He's going to send them to the very people from whom He has to rescue him.

Why does he send them to Jew and Gentile alike? Verse 18, *"to open their eyes so that they may turn from darkness to the light and from the dominion of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins and an inheritance among those who have been sanctified by faith in Me."* God sent Jesus Christ. Jesus sent the apostle Paul, as Jesus Himself was sent to open the eyes of the world. To open the eyes of the world to the love and kindness of God, and to transfer those who believe in Christ from Satan's kingdom of utter and absolute darkness and chaos and increasing wickedness that is only restrained by God's presence and His Spirit in and through His people, restrained by God's sovereign purposes. Satan rules the kingdom of darkness. Those in the kingdom of darkness are totally enslaved to their sin apart from God. God sent His Son Jesus to rescue us from the kingdom of darkness, to transfer us to God's kingdom of marvelous light. And it's in His kingdom of marvelous light that we experience forgiveness right now and forever, a total cleansing forgiveness of God. And we are sanctified; we're set apart for a purpose of giving our life to the One who gave His life to us, so that we're not yet who we will be, but we are, by God's grace, not the person we once were.

Paul explained to King Agrippa that he was obedient to King Jesus. The first act of obedience is to get up. The second is to stand up and to stand before the forgiven Christ. I have often wondered about this, because the apostle John in Revelation 1 - he had a long history with Jesus; he was tight with Jesus and he lived a long time; so, having really walked closely with Jesus during the earthly life of Jesus, and then served Jesus for a long time--he's on this island of Patmos; he has this vision of the glorified Jesus - he also falls on his face. So I've wondered, what will we do when we finally experience this glory that to us is just a category? We've never seen it. And I think that we most likely will fall on our face. But as Jesus did with John--He reached out to John and He touched him and He said "stand up." It's what He does here to Saul. Saul doesn't deserve to stand before Christ. He's just been in the process of hunting down--bounty hunter, looking for Christians so he can drag them back to the city where he can do damage to them. He doesn't deserve to

stand. But when Christ says stand, he gets up and he obeys. He tells him to go, he goes. He is persistent in his newfound faith in Christ. He is persistent and he doesn't give up and he doesn't stop until he is totally done and he is with Christ. So he continues to serve Christ. So now he turns to Agrippa and he says, "That's what got me into trouble in Jerusalem. That's what upset the religious leaders in Jerusalem. When I told them that Jesus is God's son, the fulfillment of the Old Testament," - verse 23 and 24 - *"that Christ was to suffer, and that by reason of His resurrection from the dead He would be the first to proclaim light both to the Jewish people and to the Gentiles."* That's his message, that the resurrected risen Jesus is light. Light to Jew and a light to Gentile.

This provokes Festus. What does Festus know about Paul? Well, he knows that Paul is incredibly brilliant, that he's been to the best schools, that he probably knew more about the Old Testament than anybody in the room. So what does Festus say to Paul? Verse 24, *"While Paul was saying this in defense, Festus said in a loud voice, 'Paul, you are out of your mind! Your great learning is driving you mad.'"* Says it twice. Twice he says to Paul, "You're nuts. You're crazy. And all of that studying that you've done over the years, it's finally gotten to you. You don't know what you're talking about." So now you're talking with someone who's got a lot of power over you, and you're speaking of who Jesus is, and they say to you, "You're crazy." How are you going to respond? Well, Paul responds this way, verse 25, *"Paul said, 'I am not out of my mind, most excellent, Festus. I utter words of sober truth.'" I'm not crazy. I'm not crazy, "most excellent Festus."* He speaks with such respect to the leaders who are holding this trial for him.

And then he turns to Agrippa and he redirects his comments to Agrippa. So he's got in the room Romans; he's got in the room Jews; and he's got Agrippa who knows the Old Testament really well. So now he turns to Agrippa. Verse 26, *"The king knows about these matters, and I speak to him also with confidence, since I am persuaded that none of these things escape his notice; for this has not been done in a corner."* In other words, "everything I have just said to you is easily verified, and Agrippa knows the score. He knows the story. He knows the history."

And then Paul does something phenomenally bold. It's like this direct question. He is the one who has been asked questions; now he asks the most important question of all. Verse 27, "*King Agrippa, do you believe the prophets? I know that you do.*" Well, Agrippa knows where he's going with that. Because, if Agrippa says "yes, I believe the prophets," then Paul seals it; he closes it with "Jesus is the fulfillment of the Old Testament, He is the One the prophets predicted, He is the Messiah, He is the One that God announced that God would send His Son to save." And Agrippa replies; he knows where Paul is going. Verse 28. "*He replied to Paul, 'In a short time you will persuade me to become a Christian.'*" In a short time. Not yet, almost, but I don't believe; I don't yield; I don't confess, but maybe.

Well, Paul seizes on the maybe, and he says, "I wish to God. I pray to God for you, Agrippa, whether in a short time - today, tomorrow, a long time - that you would know the Jesus I know, that you would know the Jesus who gave His life, is raised from the dead, that you would know and love Him and receive and experience forgiveness of sin, the Spirit of God, the power of God to do what only God can do. And then he says, "And to all who are in the room, who hear my voice, I would that you know Jesus, that you would become and believe just as do I, with one exception." Verse 29, Paul said, "*I would wish to God, that whether in a short or long time, not only you, but also all who hear me this day, might become such as I am except for these chains.*" I wish to God that you knew Jesus. I pray that God opens the eyes of your heart. Today, tomorrow, someday. That you will be restored to this forgiven-forever right relationship with God.

And the response of the rulers and the entourage that are on this dias--Paul's looking up at them; they're seated. The response is that Festus and Agrippa and Bernice and all of their pompous party, they rise, they go to the side, and they begin to talk about what they just heard, to talk among themselves. Who Paul is, what is he guilty of, what did he do? What is Festus going to tell Caesar, "this is why I am sending this guy to you." Verse 30-32, "*The king stood up and the governor and Bernice, and those who were sitting with them, and when they had gone aside they began talking to one another, saying, 'This man is not doing*

anything worthy of death or imprisonment.' And Agrippa said to Festus, 'This man might have been set free if he had not appealed to Caesar.'"

I love that last line. He's innocent. He might have been set free if he hadn't exercised his right as citizen, if he hadn't appealed to a greater power than Caesar. Truth is, not even Caesar can set a person free. Certainly not Festus, not Agrippa. No earthly power can set any one of us free. All of us apart from Christ, we are chained; we are prisoners. We are prisoners, apart from Christ, of our sin. Only Jesus Christ can set us free from the chains of sin that bind the human soul, mind, every human heart. We are all guilty before a loving and righteous God. Apart from Christ, we're unforgiven; we're stuck in our sin. The apostle however, even though he wears physical chains, the chains representing the power of Rome, the apostle has been set free. He is free; he is forgiven; he is free from all earthly powers. He is truly and rightfully free to give his life in service to Jesus Christ, and he invites us to experience a freedom that only God can give, that we would all experience the freedom he has in Christ.

What does it look like to be truly free? Well first, it looks like this: a life that demonstrates the transforming power of Jesus Christ. They knew Paul; you could not argue with the transformation and the difference in his life. They may not believe in Jesus Christ, but they saw Paul's life, and they saw him do a 180. How are you going to explain the transformation experienced? This last Friday morning, one of the men in our Bible study, he said that when he came to know Christ, he began to live Christ before his family and those that he loved. They didn't know Christ. He said the day came when his brother said to him, "I want my old brother back. I liked you better before you became a follower of Jesus Christ." Why would you say that? Well, in II Corinthians 2, says that those who follow Christ are a fragrant aroma to those who love God and love Christ. But to those who reject Jesus, followers of Jesus are the aroma of death. So Paul is to Felix, Festus, Agrippa, Bernice. The transformed life reveals the power of God in and through the risen Jesus, working in us to do what only God can do, and at least people grasping for reasons as to why you might be so different than you used to be. He is free in the power of Christ.

Secondly, what does this life look like? It's a life that is forgiven and enjoys all of the blessings of God in Christ Jesus. The apostle Paul himself said he was the chief of all sinners. Interestingly, so much of his testimony is of what he used to be like, and now who he is, who he will be, so that he hasn't forgotten his sin, but he's not bound up in his sin. He knows he's forgiven. He says the grace of God is more than enough. The mercies of God are more than enough for even somebody like Paul. He is forgiven, he is totally free from his sin and its consequences.

Third, what does it look like? A life that is boldly persuasive for Jesus. This guy is truly--he's remarkable. The only way you can explain him is Jesus. He goes into a Jewish context, and he lays out, in their wheelhouse - their strength is that they knew Moses; they knew the prophets - and he appeals to what God revealed of Himself to His own people. And he is bold, even though they come after them. They come after him. Then he goes into the nerve center of power for Rome, and he explains who Jesus is and what Jesus has done, So he is truly bold even when he is so unpopular.

And then fourth, what does this life of freedom look like? It's a life of unshakable faith in the risen Jesus. Chapter 26:8, he asks, "*Why is it considered incredible among you if God does raise the dead?*" Of course God can raise the dead, as He raised His Son from the dead; He raised His Son to life. So that as we have our faith in this Jesus who is vindicated by resurrection life, we don't need to be afraid of anybody or anything. We don't need to be angry. We are released from all of that stuff that comes with difficult circumstances and hardships and sicknesses and disease and broken relationships, so that we can be confident in this unshakeable grace that God gives in and through His Son Jesus Christ. Only God has the power of resurrection. Jesus says we're saved by faith in the risen Jesus. The risen Jesus shares life with us, and nothing, no one, can take the risen Christ away from us. Because He is alive, we live. And because He lives, we can be truly free. Will you bow with me please?

Heavenly Father, thank You that You are a light to our world. A world that feels increasingly dark, a world that looks like injustice and wickedness is on the increase, in which good people hurt. Father, I ask that You would work in us and through us. That you would draw our nation to You, and our leaders to You. That people would humble themselves, be brought to their knees, brought to their face in a holy worship of who You are, of the worship that is rightfully due You with our lips and with our mind and with our heart. That You would use us in Vancouver, and Your people around the globe. That You would use us to announce Your Gospel. That Your transforming power would be clear and evident in us to those who know us best. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Ben Rico:

Amen, would you stand with us as we respond, as we cherish the grace we have been shown, as we commit ourselves to spreading this love, as we breathe out, as we speak out. Whether it's, like in last week's passage, we're speaking with friends and loved ones; or, in this week's passage, we're speaking to the powers of this world. What are we going to be speaking, and what is our breath going to be used for, and who's name are we going to proclaim? Great is our Lord. Let's proclaim Him together.

[music: "Great Are You Lord"]

Go by faith to spread the love of God.