

**THE FEAST OF FREEDOM****JEREMIAH 52:31-34**

Because today is the day after July the Fourth, I don't want to talk about the last days. I'll continue that series next Sunday. Instead, I want to talk about freedom. Not political freedom, but something even more wonderful. Spiritual freedom. I want to take you back into the Old Testament to the prophecy of Jeremiah this morning. Jeremiah might have been the most unpopular prophet that ever lived! He loved his country, Judah, deeply and wanted the very best for his nation. By the way, the nation of Israel by this time had become two separate nations – Israel in the north and Judah in the south. But Israel had in fact already been obliterated by the Assyrian empire over a hundred years before Jeremiah's ministry. God gave Jeremiah a very difficult message for the people of Judah. Because of their persistent idolatry, God was going to allow the then mighty empire of Babylon under its king, Nebuchadnezzar, to destroy Jerusalem and take many of the people of Judah into exile. As ironic as it seemed, God was going to use an utterly godless nation, Babylon, as His method of judgment upon His people for their sin. Deeply patriotic, Jeremiah was branded as a traitor. He was persecuted and abused by Judah's political and religious leaders. But, of course, everything he predicted would happen happened. He was simply God's messenger.

Now, before we read our Scripture passage for today, let me give you some very important background in three scenes. The first scene is the city of Jerusalem. The year is 597 BC. The king of Judah, Jehoiakim, had just died in the midst of great political and social turmoil. The whole country of Judah was filled with great anxiety because the dead king had opposed Babylon's efforts to bring his country under Babylon's control. The king's son, Jehoiachin, was crowned as the new king of Judah at the very experienced age of 18! Almost as soon as Jehoiachin assumed the throne of Judah, the Babylonian army appeared on the horizon and laid siege to the city of Jerusalem. Not one of Judah's allies came to their assistance. No one wanted to take on big, bad Babylon. After about three months of siege, the young king Jehoiachin surrendered. Then, he, his mother, and many of Jerusalem's leading citizens were taken away to exile in Babylon never again to return to the land of their birth.

Scene number two. Now we are in the fabulous, remarkable city of Babylon. The year is 560 BC – some 37 years since young Jehoiachin was taken into exile. Since then much has happened, but none of it good for the exiled people from Judah. After several years of living in exile in Babylon, Jehoiachin had apparently gotten himself involved in some sort of rebellion against Nebuchadnezzar, the Babylonian king. Jehoiachin was put in prison in Babylon and had been there for a very long period of time – 37 years. What had happened back in Jerusalem? Nothing good. Ten years after Jehoiachin was taken to Babylon the city of Jerusalem was totally destroyed in 587 BC, the temple demolished, and all but a few poor farmers were taken out of the country and into exile as well. What was left of the people of Judah remained there in Babylon for the next sixty years as God's punishment for their idolatry and disobedience to God.

A third scene. Imagine with me a beautiful, ornate banquet hall in that capital city of Babylon used only by the king of Babylon himself. Nebuchadnezzar had just died and

his son, Evil-Merodach, was the new emperor. Seated around that great table were the conquered kings of other countries as well as the elite of Babylon itself. Everyone was dazzled and amazed by the splendor of their surroundings. From an obscure door, a slight figure entered the room. The man is stooped both outwardly and inwardly – beaten, stripped of any dignity – after years of imprisonment. Nevertheless, he was free after 37 years in prison. Yes, it was Jehoiachin, “the boy king” of Judah, who was no longer a boy at the age of 55. A stir rippled through that great chamber as this new visitor was called forth and given a seat above all the other conquered kings exiled in Babylon. Evil-Merodach not only released Jehoiachin from prison, but he took off his prison clothes and gave him a place of honor at the king’s table. And this act of kindness didn’t just happen once, but for the rest of Jehoiachin’s life.

Now, with that background let’s read our text for today. I see a remarkable parable in that brief story to what we are going to do a little later this morning: celebrating the Lord’s Supper. When you live outside of Jesus you live in a prison. It’s a prison of sin, a prison of self, a prison supervised by the devil. Because of Jesus and in Jesus, you are released from every spiritual prison that exists. But Evil-Merodach did more than just release Jehoiachin from prison. He invited him to dine at the king’s table for the rest of his life. There’s a wonderful parallel to the Lord’s Table. You and I are received by King Jesus. Jesus not only releases us from our spiritual prisons; He also invites us to dine with Him at His Table – the King’s Table. Here’s another way to think of the celebration of Communion. We could call it the Feast of Freedom. The Lord’s Supper and this Table remind us that it is here – in and through Jesus – that first of all...

### **I AM RELEASED FROM MY PRISONS.**

There are literal prisons and spiritual prisons. The Bible teaches that when you live outside of a relationship with Jesus, you only exist in a kind of spiritual prison. Listen to how Jesus frames it. “And you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.... I tell you the truth, everyone who sins is a slave of sin.... So if the Son sets you free, you are truly free.” (Jo 8:32-36 NLT) When you come to Jesus, you’re set free from sin’s prison – set free to become the person God wants you to be. The Lord’s Supper is both a reminder and an invitation to come out of your spiritual prison cell and take off your prison clothes like Jehoiachin did literally.

What is it that imprisons us spiritually? One is sheer spiritual ignorance. It used to be that you could safely assume that most Americans had, at the very least, a kind basic knowledge of Jesus. You can assume that no longer. One woman tells the story of going into a jewelry store looking for a necklace. She told the salesman, “I’d like a necklace with a gold cross.” The man behind the counter looked over his stock in the display case and said, “Do you want a plain one, or one with a little man on it?” Did he even know that the “little man” on the cross was supposed to represent Jesus? We stress education in our country for good reason. Ignorance gets you nowhere. By the same token, ignorance of God and ignorance of God’s Word gets you nowhere spiritually. That’s one reason you’re going to see as part of our intentional effort to create a strong discipleship culture in our church a repeated emphasis on knowing and

reflecting on Scripture for yourself. The less you know about the Bible, the more limited you will be. The more you know about the Bible, the more spiritually free you will be.

What imprisons us spiritually? Certainly our personal sin itself imprisons us. Sin manifests itself in many ways. Most of us have no problem recognizing things like murder, adultery, lying and stealing as sins. But sin has many faces and some of them can begin to look acceptable and reasonable over time – gossip, secret lust, financial irresponsibility, laziness, lack of concern for those who are spiritually lost, contempt for the poor – just to name a few. We get used to sins like that and learn to tolerate them in our lives. But make no mistake, to tolerate sin – any sin – is to choose to remain in a kind of spiritual prison. Here's a great quote from the movie *My Dinner With Andre*. "We are like inmates of a vast concentration camp. The doors to the camp have been unlocked for years. We can go if we wish. But we stay, not because we're happy, but since we helped build the camp, we are so proud of how it looks. We may be slaves here, but who knows what lies outside the gate. So we stay and redecorate our cells." Anytime we tolerate and excuse a sin that the Holy Spirit convicts us about, we are choosing to redecorate a spiritual prison cell.

What imprisons us spiritually? Certainly the power of the past – my sins or hurts. Some people can't let go of a sin they committed in the past. It's been confessed. It's been forsaken. But you continue to experience a crippling sense of guilt and shame that robs your life of joy and freedom. That's a real, but an awful prison. When you come to the King's Table, you take off the prison clothes of false guilt and shame. Other people can't let go of a sin committed against them in the past. Something in your past went very wrong. It was unfair, cruel, and left you bleeding and busted up. Perhaps a person mistreated you in some way or you were a victim of a horrible experience. You live in a personal prison of bitterness and resentment. When you come to the King's Table, you take off the prison clothes of resentment.

What else imprisons us spiritually? There's a lot of stuff out there that can become a spiritual prison. How about relationships that God has forbidden? A sexual relationship outside of the commitment to marriage. Even a growing romantic relationship with someone who doesn't share your commitment to Jesus. How about our prejudices about other people? They're the wrong color, or the wrong socio-economic bracket, or they just don't measure up to our expectations in some way – so we exclude them from our lives. How about living everyday life from a materialistic or consumer mentality? Money and things can be incredibly deceptive. Having more of them seems like having more joy and freedom. But when you pursue them, they quickly become a prison. There's so many other prisons we could mention: how about anxiety about the future or fear of failure? When you come to the King's Table, you take off the prison clothes of things like forbidden relationships, prejudices, a consumer mentality, and even fear.

Down in South America, jungle tribes often earn money by trapping animals used for research by scientists all around the world. Do you know how you trap a monkey? Pretty easy actually. Drill a hole in a coconut, hollow out the insides, fasten the coconut to a chain, and make great show of putting a piece of candy or some other kind of bait

into the coconut. It's usually the biggest and dumbest monkey who comes down and sticks his hand into the coconut. But when he grabs the bait inside, he can't get his fist back out of the hole. Believe it or not, that monkey will hold onto that bait until the natives return. He won't let it go. Sin is exactly like that. It may look good and tasty, like that monkey bait, but it will imprison you.

As we come to the King's Table this morning, may I ask you to let the Holy Spirit reveal what you may be holding onto today? We've identified only a few potential prisons. Yours or mine might be different than the ones I've mentioned, but they imprison us just the same. Don't be a dumb monkey. Let go of whatever sin the Holy Spirit reveals and walk away free. This is the Feast of Freedom. Take off the prison clothes and put on the clothes of freedom. When you come to the King's Table, you're released from your spiritual prisons. But our story suggests something more. The Lord's Supper and this Table also reminds you and me that...

### **I AM RECEIVED BY THE KING.**

I wonder what Jehoiachin thought when he was finally released from his Babylonian prison after 37 years. He was probably just happy to be out of prison and looked forward to living out the rest of his years in peaceful obscurity. But our text today records the extraordinary kindness of this new Babylonian emperor, Evil-Merodach. Not only does he release Jehoiachin from prison, but then he invites Jehoiachin to dine with him in the royal banquet hall. This wasn't a one-time invitation either. Our text says, "So the Babylonian king gave him a regular food allowance as long as he lived. This continued until the day of his death." (Jer 52:34 NLT) Jehoiachin didn't insist on or request this blessing. After all, who was he to insist on or request anything? Jehoiachin didn't deserve or earn this benefit. What had he done to deserve or earn anything? The invitation to have fellowship with and enjoy the friendship of the Babylonian king was simply because of the gracious attitude of Evil-Merodach.

Do you see the picture of our relationship to Jesus in that story? It would be enough if Jesus just released us from the prisons of our own sin, of self, and of whatever kind of bondage the devil has put us in. We're in no position to insist on or request anything more from King Jesus. We certainly have in no way deserved or earned a friendship with Him. Nevertheless, every time we come to the King's Table as we do again today – this Feast of Freedom – we're confronted with the marvelous truth that Jesus wants us to experience something more than being released or freed from the tyranny of our own sin. Much more! Jesus actually invites you and me into a daily, continual and eternal relationship with Him. He offers us fellowship and friendship.

In the ancient world, to eat a meal with someone – "table fellowship" – was a sign of acceptance and friendship. The Lord's Supper is an invitation to have table fellowship with the God of the universe. The song "God And Man At Table Are Sat Down" captures that idea well: "Who is this who spreads the vict'ry feast? Who is this who makes our warring cease? What Jesus, risen Savior, Prince of Peace. God and man at table are sat down." Do we deserve to come to the King's Table today – this Feast of

Freedom? Have we in anyway earned it? Or did we in some way seek God out and suggest He invite us? Of course not! The Bible makes it pretty clear that the only reason we ever reach out to God is simply because He was there first reaching out to us. Like Jehoiachin, we are invited to and received at the King's Table out of sheer grace and grace alone.

Why did Evil-Merodach, this Babylonian king, show such compassion to undeserving Jehoiachin? We aren't told why. Perhaps there was some political reason behind Evil-Merodach's kindness. Why does God have compassion on you and me? Why did He send His Son to us? Why did He send His Son to die a cruel, humiliating death for the likes of you and me? Why does King Jesus live today in order to represent us before His Father in Heaven? Grace. Love. Very true indeed, but you can't really explain that kind of grace and love. You can only marvel at it. You can only be astounded by it. You can only bow in humility before this King Jesus who pours out such astonishing grace and love upon us. To come to the King's Table today is to be reminded that you are invited to be the friend of Jesus and the child of God.

And just like Jehoiachin, your invitation to the King's Table today is not a one-time invitation. You're invited to this Table and all that it represents continually and forever. That's one reason why we keep on celebrating Communion – because God's forgiveness, cleansing and peace are offered continually not just once. "O, welcome all ye noble saints of old, As now before your very eyes unfold. The wonders all so long ago foretold, God and man at table are sat down."

If you put a buzzard into a pen six foot square and entirely open at the top, it will be an absolute prisoner forever. The reason is that a buzzard always begins its flight from the ground with a run of ten or twelve feet. Without space to get that kind of start, he will not attempt to fly but will remain a prisoner for life in a small jail with no top. The ordinary bat that flies around at night is a remarkably nimble creature in the air. But the bat can't take off from a level place. If it's placed on the floor or on flat ground, all it can do is shuffle around helplessly until it reaches some kind of small elevation from which it can throw itself into the air. A bumblebee will die in a glass without a top unless it's taken out. It never sees the means of escape at the top of the glass, but persists in trying to find some way out of its prison through the sides near the bottom.

In many ways, we can be like the buzzard, the bat, and the bumblebee. We can realize our deep need and the fact that we're in a spiritual prison of some kind. We hunger and long to be free. We can push and shove to find a way out of our situation ourselves. But we fail. We overlook the obvious fact that the way out is "up." The way out of sin and the way out of the prisons we create for ourselves is always "up"! The way is through King Jesus and there is no other way. God sent His Son to die on a cross and be raised again that we might have a way of escape from everything that imprisons us. He invites us to come and have a fellowship with Him at His Table. It is there we can once again mount up with the wings of eagles and dwell with Him now and throughout eternity. The Feast of Freedom reminds us that the only way "out" is "up."