

# LIVE FREE

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Have you ever wanted to do the right thing, yet found yourself doing the wrong thing anyway? This inner turmoil and its solution are the subject of Paul's Letter to the Romans, chapters 7 and 8. But what about when the interference comes from outside of you?

Have you ever tried to do the right thing and been assailed for it? Were you ever sincerely trying to help when your motive was misjudged and you were labeled as selfish?

How did you *feel* about that? Hurt? Embarrassed? Misunderstood? Angry?

What did you *think* about that? "I shouldn't have done it"? "See if I help them again"? "That's what I get"? "Live and learn"?

Was your original effort to do right wasted?

It may interest you to know that God is very familiar with such dealings. In fact, you yourself may once have treated Him that way.

Regardless, He knows that we often treat each other that way. He cares when you experience such treatment and He wants to help you get through it.

Seldom recognized, but even worse, in such situations, we are usually our own *worst* advocate! Unwittingly, we undo ourselves with our responses to the circumstances. But God offers a better plan — if we can only hear it.

Please listen closely to these words from Apostle Peter, as translated by Eugene Peterson in *The Message*.

## **Your Job**

*MSG 1 Peter 3:8-9 Summing up: Be agreeable, be sympathetic, be loving, be compassionate, be humble. That goes for all of you, no exceptions. No retaliation. No sharp-tongued sarcasm. Instead, bless—that's your job, to bless. You'll be a blessing and also get a blessing.*

*MSG 1 Peter 3:13-18 If with heart and soul you're doing good, do you think you can be stopped? Even if you suffer for it, you're still better off. Don't give the opposition a second thought. Through thick and thin, keep your hearts at attention, in adoration before Christ, your Master. Be ready to speak up and tell anyone who asks why you're living the way you are, and always with the utmost courtesy. Keep a clear conscience before God so that when people throw mud at you, none of it will stick. They'll end up realizing that they're the ones who need a bath. It's better to suffer for doing good, if that's what God wants, than to be punished for doing bad. That's what Christ did definitively: suffered because of others' sins, the Righteous One for the unrighteous ones. He went through it all—was put to death and then made alive—to bring us to God.*

*MSG 1 Peter 4:1-2 Since Jesus went through everything you're going through and more, learn to think like him. Think of your sufferings as a weaning from that old sinful habit of always expecting to*

*get your own way. Then you'll be able to live out your days free to pursue what God wants instead of being tyrannized by what you want.*

*MSG 1 Peter 4:12-13 Friends, when life gets really difficult, don't jump to the conclusion that God isn't on the job. Instead, be glad that you are in the very thick of what Christ experienced. This is a spiritual refining process, with glory just around the corner.*

*MSG 1 Peter 4:19 So if you find life difficult because you're doing what God said, take it in stride. Trust him. He knows what he's doing, and he'll keep on doing it.*

“That’s your job — to bless.” That’s pretty clear. And this job description doesn’t change just because circumstances get rough. What stops us from blessing others? We may say *their* behavior stops us, but God’s Word reveals that it is our own behavior, not theirs.

When our actions are misjudged or opposed, we may fear that those who oppose us could prevent us from doing the will of the Lord. We may fear that their opinion of us is the one that counts. Such fears betray a misunderstanding of the sovereign power of God. We actually fear that He cannot achieve what He wants without our help, and we cannot help Him as long as such people stand in our way.

The pages of Scripture do not support those notions.

*Psalm 115:3 Our God is in the heavens, and he does as he wishes.*

This is why Jesus taught us to begin our prayer with “Our Father, who is in heaven...” We remind ourselves that the One to whom we pray is the Sovereign King of the universe, who is able to do just as He wishes.

What’s more, our misunderstanding leads us to get in our own way, by diminishing our trust in God and increasing our self-dependence. We begin to think that God isn’t pulling His weight and now, as a result, it all really depends on us — the Messiah complex.

It is to this distortion of purpose and power that Peter writes and offers a solution. The entire passage that we have read addresses it, but we will focus on the heart of it — 1 Peter 4:1-2 — examining it in three parts.

## **How Do You Think?**

*MSG 1 Peter 4:1a Since Jesus went through everything you're going through and more, learn to think like him.*

Thinking like Jesus does not happen overnight. It must be learned. As you read the four Gospels, it may surprise you how often Jesus asked His disciples, “What do you think?” Other times He warned them what not to think.

Why is this so important? Because, as a wise man once wrote, “As a person thinks in his heart, so is he” (Proverbs 23:7). In other words, the way a person thinks and the motives he pursues, define who he is.

We should be defined by thinking like Jesus. What carried Him through the things He went through? How was He able to endure mistreatment and still keep in step with the Holy Spirit? Why didn’t mis-

judgment knock Him off the path like it often does to us? Why did He keep permitting them to take another swing at Him?

Peter has urged us to take our cues from Jesus, exactly because He successfully endured such abuse.

## Weaned From Entitlement

*MSG 1 Peter 4:1b Think of your sufferings as a weaning from that old sinful habit of always expecting to get your own way.*

Even those of us who have the worst self-image suffer from the plague of *moral* entitlement. It manifests in various ways:

- If I want what is right I should receive what is right.
- If I do what is right I should be treated right.
- If I don't do right but say, "I'm sorry," I should be treated right.
- If I make amends I should be treated right.
- If I do right most of the time I should be treated right.
- If I do right at least some of the time I should be treated right.
- Regardless of whether I do right or not I should be treated right.

Then there is the related plague of *spiritual* entitlement:

- If I give my life to Jesus I should get what I want in life.
- If I ask in Jesus' name I should get what I want.
- If I ask repeatedly and don't give up I should get what I want.
- If I get someone to agree with me then I should get what I want.
- If I go to church regularly and pray and read my Bible I should get what I want.

There is something deep within each one of us that cries out, "I deserve what I want!"

The Bible calls this "that old sinful habit of always expecting to get your own way." It is sinful because it cuts in on God, pushing my way in front of His. At some level, it simply ignores God, because I want what I want.

Dreams are good — they motivate us to move forward. But some dreams come from God, while others are just self-generated dreams. And even the dreams that come from God are just dreams, not reality, and dreams by nature are symbolic. So, the dream God has given *represents* the thing He wants to do in my life, but its realization may look quite different from the representative elements of the dream itself. (Consider Joseph's dream of bowing sheaves of wheat. The dream came to pass in substance, but it did not look just like what he saw in the dream.) Pursue the dreams God has given you, but leave the actual outcome (the dream's interpretation and realization) in His hands to shape.

I may have persuaded myself that what I want is what God wants, and have the proof texts to confirm it. Or, I may even have adopted what God told me that He wanted for me, but assumed that meant without detour or delay. I expect it the way I imagined it — looking like I imagined it, coming in the way that I imagined it, delivered in the timing that I imagined, and having the impact that I imagined.

That is sinful because it cuts God out of the action. He gets to grant it, but the rest is in my hands.

Of course, what *actually* happens is that *my* way is frequently ignored as God does what *He* wants, and I suffer frustration with God (or with His Word or with His Church). My mind goes haywire. I think God isn't hearing my prayers (He is ignoring me, or I have displeased Him). I think that God doesn't

really care about me (He plays favorites). I think that God is punishing me for something I did a long time ago (even though I can't think what it might be).

This is why it is so important for me to learn to *think like Jesus*. Whenever He thought such things, He knew how to counter those thoughts with the truths of God's Word before they took over and ran away with Him. He knew how to keep His thoughts in step with the Spirit.

And so, Peter writes, "Think like Him: think of your sufferings as a weaning."

Jesus, "the Captain of our salvation," wrote Paul, "became a mature leader through the things that He suffered" (Hebrews 2:10).

And so it is with us. The things that we suffer are the growing pains that wean us from self-dependence to God-dependence. We imagine that self-dependence is the goal, while it is actually the starting line. Self-dependence in itself is fruitless. God-dependence is where fruitfulness begins. Self-dependence is the essence of sin. God-dependence is deliverance from sin.

## **Real Freedom**

*MSG 1 Peter 4:2 Then you'll be able to live out your days free to pursue what God wants instead of being tyrannized by what you want.*

In spite of the fact that what we want often gives us much pleasure when we get it (at least briefly), "what you want" is a tyrant that can ruin your life! It is a ball and chain. "Expecting to get your own way" is a prison house, from which only God can deliver. What God wants is to set you free to live the life God made you for.

Freedom to pursue what God wants is the result of weaning by suffering — insults, setbacks, disciplinary actions, delays, opposition — all those things too familiar to all of us. These things have not been permitted by God in order to stop you, but to *shape* you to receive what you were made for from the beginning.

Let them have their way. When you resist God's tools you resist God. Instead, let them abuse you of the notion of your entitlement. Let them separate you from self-dependence. Let them teach you that only God gets His own way.

If you are weaned, as God has designed, then you can put away the bottle and begin to eat solid spiritual food. Then you will learn how to walk with Christ, stay in step with the Spirit, and please the Father. Then your life will become full and fruitful, as Jesus intended.

Freedom to do what God wants is real freedom indeed. Therefore, let's give ourselves — heart and soul — to God. Let's say repeatedly, "Lord, Your will be done. Have Your way with me. Teach me to think like Jesus."