

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

As the crisp air of autumn heralds the approach of October 31, we gather not merely to mark a date on the calendar, but to celebrate the spark that ignited the Lutheran Reformation in 1517—a movement that reclaimed the pure Gospel of freedom in Christ. Picture the cobblestone streets of Wittenberg, where a humble monk, driven by the Holy Spirit, hammered his Ninety-Five Theses to the castle church door, challenging the shadows that had dimmed the light of grace. This Reformation Day, we turn our hearts to John 8:31-36, where Jesus declares the essence of that reclaimed truth: "So Jesus said to the Jews who had believed him, 'If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.' They answered him, 'We are offspring of Abraham and have never been enslaved to anyone. How is it that you say, "You will become free"?' Jesus answered them, 'Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who practices sin is a slave to sin. The slave does not remain in the house forever; the son remains forever. So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed.'"

At the heart of this passage, and echoing through the Reformation's legacy, pulses one eternal truth: True freedom comes only when the Son sets us free from the bondage of sin. This is no temporary reprieve or human invention; it is the divine emancipation that the Reformers fought to proclaim, reshaping souls and societies alike. Let us delve into this through what freedom is not—and what it radiantly is—allowing the Spirit to stir our hearts anew in this season of remembrance.

First, true freedom is not the conquest of human resolve against worldly perils, as if our sheer determination could sever the deepest chains. Reflect on the perilous journey of the Apollo 13 mission in 1970, when an oxygen tank explosion crippled the spacecraft en route to the moon, leaving astronauts Jim Lovell, Fred Haise, and Jack Swigert stranded in the void of space. Facing

freezing temperatures, dwindling power, and toxic carbon dioxide buildup, the crew and ground teams at NASA improvised with duct tape, cardboard, and sheer ingenuity to jury-rig solutions, guiding the module back to Earth against all odds. Their unyielding spirit and collaborative grit turned catastrophe into survival, a beacon of human achievement that still captivates. Yet this liberty was from external dangers—mechanical failure and the harshness of space—not the inward tyranny Jesus addresses. "Everyone who practices sin is a slave to sin," He warns. The Greek word *doulos* here pierces the veil: it denotes a bondsman, wholly possessed and driven by an unyielding lord. Sin is that lord, not a faulty spacecraft but a pervasive force warping our desires and deeds. The Apollo crew escaped lunar orbit's pull, but without the Son's intervention, we linger as *doulos*, our spirits adrift in sin's relentless storm, far from the Reformation's call to grace alone.

Nor is true freedom the illumination of intellect or invention, as if amassing knowledge could unlock the soul's prison. Consider Marie Curie's relentless quest in the laboratories of Paris at the turn of the 20th century. Amidst glowing test tubes and painstaking extractions, she unveiled the secrets of radioactivity, isolating radium in 1902 and revolutionizing medicine and physics. Her discoveries pierced the veil of the unknown, earning acclaim and advancing humanity's grasp on the material world. This was a freedom of enlightenment, banishing ignorance about invisible forces that shape our universe. But Jesus offers more: "You will know the truth, and the truth will set you free." This truth transcends facts—it is Christ Himself, the incarnate Word. The crowd in John's account clung to their Abrahamic pedigree, oblivious to their spiritual captivity. Curie's radium emitted a ethereal light, yet it could not penetrate the gloom of guilt and shame that ensnares every heart untouched by the Gospel the Reformers restored.

Moreover, true freedom is not the restructuring of institutions or traditions, as if altering outward forms could redeem the inner man. Yet in celebrating the Reformation this October 31, we honor precisely such a divine upheaval through human hands. Martin Luther, tormented by a conscience that no penance could quiet, discovered in Scripture the righteousness of God as a gift,

not a wage. His act on that All Saints' Eve in 1517—affixing those theses—unleashed a torrent that swept away indulgences, clerical abuses, and works-righteousness, flooding Europe with the Bible in vernacular tongues and hymns that still lift our voices. Princes rallied, councils convened, and the church was reborn in fidelity to God's Word. This reformation freed believers from man-made burdens, echoing Jesus' promise. But even Luther knew it was no ultimate liberty; it was a signpost to the Son. The hearers in our text denied their enslavement, blinded by heritage. True change demands abiding—the Greek *menō*, meaning to dwell deeply, as a vine clings to its branch. Abiding in Christ's word forges disciples, not through decrees or debates, but through intimate union with Him, a truth the Reformation boldly proclaimed amid peril and persecution.

But beloved, true freedom is this: the Son setting us free, declaring us "free indeed" in a liberation that the Reformation echoes across centuries. Envision the apostle Paul, once Saul, a fierce enforcer of the law, hunting Christians with zeal that masked his own bondage. On the road to Damascus in Acts 9, heaven's light struck him blind, and Christ's voice shattered his illusions: "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?" In that encounter, sin's grip was exposed—pride, violence, self-deception. But the Son did not abandon him; through Ananias, forgiveness flowed, sight returned, and Paul emerged free, commissioned to carry the Gospel to nations. This is the freedom Jesus bestows: from slave to son, from fleeting tenant to eternal heir. "The slave does not remain in the house forever; the son remains forever." Through His cross and empty tomb, Christ dismantles sin's dominion, inviting us to abide in His mercy, His power, His unending love.

Let this truth grip your heart this Reformation season: You, burdened by hidden faults and fleeting joys, are seen and cherished by the Son. No expedition's endurance, no laboratory's light, no institutional reform—not even the heroic stand of 1517—can fully free without Him. Yet in Christ, the Reformation's flame burns bright, reminding us of grace that conquers all.

In recapping these truths, we see freedom evades us in exploits like the Apollo 13 survival, insights like Curie's discoveries, and renewals like the Reformation's dawn. These are but reflections of a greater glory. Yet the powerful, spiritual work Jesus performs in and for us is profound, reaching into your life right now: Through His atoning death on the cross, where He bore the weight of your sins—every lie, every resentment, every failure—He sets you free from God's righteous judgment, declaring you not guilty in the courtroom of heaven. By His resurrection, bursting from the grave, He liberates you from permanent physical death, promising your body will rise incorruptible, whole and vibrant in eternity. And in His rule over the kingdom, seated at the Father's right hand, He shields you from the agony of suffering in the lake of fire, that final separation from God's presence, drawing you instead into everlasting joy where pain and tears are no more. This is how Jesus frees you personally—sin's power broken, death defeated, hell's terror banished—inviting you to abide in His word, unveiling truth that transforms your weary heart into one alive with hope. This is the Gospel's triumph, celebrated anew each October 31, flooding your life with liberty that endures. May it kindle your soul, drawing you deeper into the embrace of the Savior who sets you free. Amen.

The peace of God guard your hearts and minds as you believe and trust in Him.

Pastor Ron Bright  
Pennsylvania

Christ Lutheran Church

Forest

Hills,

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