

Freedom in Christ: Choosing to believe the truth

She wasn't the most attractive girl in the group – far from it – she was really quite ordinary. She didn't have the sort of figure that would turn the heads of most guys, and she certainly didn't dress in a way that would draw any attention. She didn't have the money to buy all the latest fashion items or gadgets; her family was a bit of a mess too. Her father was a drunk who had deserted his family. Her mother had to work two jobs just so they had enough money to live on. She didn't have a career mum – just one who would take whatever job she could get to earn some money. Her older brother was a drug addict – sometimes at home, sometimes not, and bringing all the chaos that goes with a life dependant on drugs. As a university student she was nothing spectacular, she would be the one who slipped through almost unnoticed. She had nothing that made her stand out – nothing materially or academically or physically. And yet – everybody loved her, she had more friends than most, and she eventually married the nicest guy on the course.

He was a young man with everything going for him. He was bright, intelligent and talented. By the time he was 30 he had lived his father's dream. His father had continually pushed him and demanded ever higher standards. However hard he tried though, it seemed he could never quite do enough to please his father. He did very well though. Being gifted and talented he won a place at the US Naval Academy and qualified for flight school. He achieved what most young men only get to dream about – he became a member of the elite corps of navy fliers. His life though had been centred on fulfilling his father's perfectionist expectations. So he left the Navy and decided he wanted to please God with his life, and he figured the only way he could do that was to become a missionary. It was while at college training to be a missionary that he realised the mistake he'd made.

She had simply but profoundly figured it out already! You see she had accepted herself for who God said she was, and chosen to believe the truth about herself. She had committed herself to God's great goal for her life: to love people and to

grow in Christ. She wasn't a threat to anyone. Instead she was so positive towards others that everyone loved her.

He had grown up with a demanding, perfectionist father who he had always struggled to please and he had figured that he had to please God just like he had his father. The only way to do that was, of course, to become a missionary. But then he discovered the truth: that God loved him because he loved him because he loved him..... And that he didn't have to do anything to earn God's love, and he certainly didn't have to become a missionary to please God! He did, actually, become a missionary, but he did it because he was responding to God's great love for him, and he chose to serve God on the mission field. He didn't do it to get God's approval – he did it out of love!¹

What was the difference between these two true stories? Well, one was based on what someone chose to believe was true and the other – to begin with – was based on having to behave.

A fruitful Christian life is the result of living by faith according to what God said is true. Friends, ask yourself this question: which of the two stories is most like yours?

Why are you here this morning? Some of us are here because we genuinely want to worship the living God. That is really true for some of us. Some of us are here because it's a habit – that's what we do on Sundays! Some of us are here to meet our friends. Some of us are here because we want to earn God's favour. My best guess would be that there are lots of us who spend a lot of our time trying to earn God's favour in one way or another! Now, the truth is – you can't do anything to earn God's favour! He loves you because he loves you because he loves you.....

God's love doesn't change according to what you do! So many of us simply don't walk day by day in the truth. How do I know that? Because we spend so much of our time trying to do the right things, to say the right things, to pray the right things The transformation for the young Navy flyer came when he chose to believe the truth about who he was in Christ! Choosing to believe the truth is living by faith! Faith – is choosing to believe the truth.

One little boy once described faith like this: “Faith is trying hard to believe what you know isn’t true!” Actually faith is the very opposite – but doesn’t it seem to be like the little boy said – isn’t that what it feels like anyway?

Here’s something you may be able to identify with:

Monday January 6

Bought a really good book about faith. It’s called “Goodness Gracious – in God’s Name, what on Earth are we doing for Heaven’s sake?” A very witty title I feel. It’s all about how Christians should be able to move mountains by faith, if they are really tuned into God. Very inspiring. Waited ‘till there was no one around, then practised with a paper-clip. Put it on my desk and stared at it, willing it to move. Nothing! Tried commanding it in a loud voice.

Tuesday January 7

Had another go with the paper-clip tonight. Really took authority over it. Couldn’t get it to budge. Told God I’d give up anything He wanted, if He would just make it move half an inch. Nothing! All rather worrying really. If you only need faith the size of a mustard seed to move a mountain, what hope is there for me when I can’t even get a paper-clip to do what it’s told.

Saturday January 11

Got up early today to have a last go at that blasted paper-clip. Ended up hissing viciously at it, trying not to wake everybody up. When I gave up and opened the door, I found Anne and Gerald listening outside in their night-clothes, looking quite anxious. Anne said, “Darling, why did you tell that paper-clip you’d straighten it out if it didn’t soon get its damned act together?”²

Haven’t we all tried that kind of thing? Friends, to live by faith we must find out what is already true and choose to believe it, and we must do this whether it feels true or not. Now for some of us that is a huge challenge! Tony Compolo tells an interesting story about feelings. In counselling couples who are struggling in marriage he tells them that if they do what he says for one month, they will be in love. His prescription is simple: do ten things each day that you would do if you really were in love. He says this: “I know that if people do loving things, it will not

be long before they experience the feelings that are often identified as being love. Love is not those feelings; love is what one will do to make the other person happy and fulfilled. Often, we don't realise that what a person does influences what he feels."

The point is that we don't begin with our feelings. We don't begin to walk by faith by trusting our feelings towards God. We begin by choosing to believe the truth. Now, everybody exercises faith. That we have faith isn't the issue. The difference between a Christian and a non-Christian is who or what we put our faith in. So how well do you know God? How well do you know the truth about who you are in Christ?

You may remember from Ephesians that the book is divided into two halves. Chapters 1 -3 are all about what God has done, we might call that doctrine – the truth about who God is and what he has done. Chapters 4-6 are about how to live in the light of chapters 1 -3. Now there's a reason why chapters 1 -3 come before chapters 4-6, and it is this: it is vital what you believe about God! Just before he tells them how to live, Paul prays one last time that the Ephesians would grasp who God is:

"For this reason I kneel before the Father, from whom his whole family in heaven and on earth derives its name. I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the saints, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge – that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God. Now to Him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations forever and ever! Amen.
(Ephesians 3 v 14-21)

Friends, what you choose to believe is absolutely vital for you to be able to live. I will preach only that of which I am convinced. Let me tell you why I am convinced that knowing the truth about God is vital. As you know, when I was 6 my dad died – suddenly and unexpectedly. I essentially grew up without a dad. When I was at

university, training to be a teacher I almost fell apart – I was 21. I had no self-confidence. I had, in my opinion turned into a failure, and the last thing in the world that I wanted to do was become a teacher. If it hadn't been for some good friends, I would have given up – let life pass me by. I was persuaded to speak with the curate of the church I grew up in – Chris Skilton. His job was to pull me out of my black hole! One day he asked me to talk about my dad. I felt ashamed that I couldn't really tell him anything. We began a conversation that lasted a few years and I began to explore the whole idea that God was my loving heavenly father. It was, for me a revelation. Up to this point the concept of father had meant nothing to me. That was now changing – and so was I. It became - and probably still is – my favourite thing to talk about, preach about and teach. I read books – anything I can get about God as father. I have also come to love Luke chapter 15 – three stories about God's love, but I particularly came to love the story of the waiting father. I have probably spoken more about that story than anything else.

I began to change as I began to know and accept the truth about my father in heaven; it's a long journey that's still going. Chris asked me to bring photos of my dad. I could only find two – we talked about them. Now I see another friend called Tim. Only this week I went to see him – and I took a whole album of photos of my dad.

Friends, choosing to believe the truth is the way of faith and the path to transformation and freedom.

1. Adapted from: Neil T. Anderson: *"Victory Over the Darkness"*, Monarch 2000 p. 59/60
2. Quoted in: *"Freedom in Christ"* Discipleship Course leader's guide. Monarch 2004 p. 51