

## Romans 6:15-23 Whose disciples are you?

### Introduction

On Tuesday 14 January 2014 there was a remarkable interview on BBC Radio 5 Live between one of the regular presenters and an individual with the unique distinction of being the only individual born in a North Korean Concentration Camp (in 1982) who has escaped to the free world to tell his story. It was an astonishing account of life experienced by men, women and children who had for whatever reason been seen as law-breakers by the Government of the 'Democratic People's Republic of Korea'. Shin Dong-hyuk. The point at which I started listening to the interview was his account, at age 14, of reporting his mother and elder brother to the prison guards because of their plans to escape from the camp. He expected to be rewarded for this action, but separately he and his father who had been allowed no contact in the camp were tortured severely because the authorities believed that they knew more details of a potential escape plan than they had revealed. Afterwards they were forced to watch the execution of his mother and brother. Shin explained that at that time he had no emotional attachment to his family members. It was forbidden because loyalty was to the state alone. Only after his escape to freedom did he suffer prolonged bouts of guilt for what he had done. At that time his mind and body knew only total enslavement in the camp.

His life was to change in the vast camp through meeting a man who had experienced life outside the camp. While working at a textile factory, Shin became friends with a 40-year-old political prisoner from Pyongyang named Park, who was educated and had traveled outside North Korea. Park told him about the outside world, such as stories about food that Shin had not experienced before. According to Shin, nearly every meal he had eaten up to that point had been a soupy gruel of cabbage, corn and salt, with occasional wild-caught rats and insects. He was excited by the idea of being able to eat as much food as he wanted to, which Shin considered to be the essence of freedom, "I still think of freedom as roasted chicken," he later admitted. Shin decided to attempt to escape with Park. They formed a plan in which Shin would provide local information about the camp, while Park would use his knowledge once outside the camp to escape the country. On 2 January 2005, the pair was assigned to a work project near the camp's electric fence on the top of a 1,200-foot (370 m) mountain ridge to collect firewood. Noting the long interval between the guards' patrols, the two waited until the guards were out of sight then made their attempt to escape. Park attempted to go through first, but was electrocuted climbing the high voltage fence. Shin managed to pass over the wire using Park's body as a shield to ground the current, but he suffered severe burns and permanent scars when his legs slipped onto the lowermost wire as he crawled over Park's body (a summary of information from Blane Harden, *Escape from Camp 14: One Man's Remarkable Odyssey From North Korea to Freedom in the West* 2012.) It was the start of his journey to freedom in first China, then the USA and finally in South Korea. For those of us who have spent all our lives in this country what he experienced is beyond our comprehension, except to grasp how appalling it is that any human beings have to live under the conditions experienced in North Korean prison camps.

In Romans 6 the apostle Paul has been seeking to explain what it means to live as a Christian now that we have received the grace of God and have begun a life of Christian discipleship. There are two main questions in this chapter. Romans 6:1: *What shall we say, then? Shall we go on sinning, so that grace may increase?* And Romans 6:15 *What then? Shall we sin because we are not under the law but under grace?* It appears superficially that Paul is repeating his earlier question in v15, but this is not accurate. He is emphasising throughout this chapter that freedom to sin is fundamentally incompatible with being united to Christ. In other words, a person who has truly trusted Jesus will not want the supposed 'freedom' to live in a manner incompatible with the teaching of the Bible. To grasp the good news of the Gospel is to understand something of our being united with Christ (Romans 6:3-14) and of being enslaved to God (Romans 6:15-23). In the former case the emphasis is on **what was done to us** on our union with Christ; in the latter section the emphasis is on **what we have**

**done** in offering our lives to God as his obedient servants. The former declaration is observed at our baptism (Romans 6:3-4) where we confess that God brought us to faith in Jesus through the enabling power of the Holy Spirit and in dying to the old life, symbolised by going under the water, we emerge committed to living a new life in His power. This is a passive action emphasising what God has done in us, whereas in the latter section of Romans 6 this is an active declaration of our conversion where we chose to respond to the effectual call of the Holy Spirit and consciously commit ourselves to follow Jesus. In Romans 6:15-23 Paul, using language and concepts very familiar to the people of his day, seeks to explain what it means to live as a disciple of Jesus Christ. To this second question of Romans 6:15 Paul passionately explains why accepting a gospel of grace does not give license to sin or to retain or cultivate an unholy lifestyle.

### **1. Reasons for rejecting a sinful lifestyle**

*What then? Shall we sin because we are not under the law but under grace? By no means! Romans 6:15)*

(a)**It ensures we are no longer enslaved by sin** (Romans 6:16a) <sup>16</sup> *Don't you know that when you offer yourselves to someone as obedient slaves, you are slaves of the one you obey... An alcoholic who has given up consuming alcohol can never safely take a first drink. There has to be a complete abstinence from that product. A drug addict can never take another fix. The only way to remain clean is to stay away from the drugs scene altogether. In the same way Paul says the Christian should become allergic to the prospect of sinning. We are not under the Jewish Law with its requirements to follow a very lengthy list of rules about every aspect of daily life rather we are the recipients of God's grace. However, this does not mean that we should engage in unhelpful activities just because they might be legal or socially acceptable. In our society the public culture is deeply sceptical about Christian (or other World Faith's) moral standards instead suggesting that everyone should be free to live how they choose to live in moral terms –with a few exceptions. Paedophile activity thankfully remains unlawful; the campaigns of Mary Whitehouse and others have been successful on this subject, despite the ridicule they endured when they first suggested this form of behaviour was unacceptable and harmful to children. The devil used this strategy of pretending that God was unreasonable and legalistic in his conversations with Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, eventually persuading them to violate God's commandments and break fellowship with their Creator (Genesis 3). The consequences of their actions have blighted this world in every succeeding generation. The higher the proportion of people choosing to live contrary to God's commands the more other people suffer and the created order is damaged. God knows what is best for His children and sets down wise boundaries for us to follow. In the same way on a lesser scale a human parent will do the same for their offspring, not to be a killjoy but to guide them with a view to them possessing the best quality of life they could experience. We have already told the story of Shin Dong-huek above who lived in the 'Democratic People's Republic of Korea'. If ever a country was misnamed with no democracy and no choices available to citizens if they wished to continue their lives. The film the 'Hunger Games' addressed this issue fairly recently but a variety of individuals have raised these kinds of issues, most notably George Orwell in his novels *Animal Farm* and especially in his *Nineteen Eighty Four*. Freedom is not found in uttering aspirational words, rather it is by being enabled by the Holy Spirit to make the right choices in our lives, both for ourselves and for other people, in the light of God's revealed guidance for our lives, as found in the Bible.*

(b)**Enslavement by sin leads to death** (Romans 6:16b)... *whether you are slaves to sin, which leads to death, or to obedience, which leads to righteousness? Paul is very clear about the*

consequences of sin. It *leads to death* (6:16); it *results in death* (6:21) and *the wages of sin is death* (6:23); there are fateful consequences for the addict who takes another taste of whatever had held them in bondage. In the same way to plan to go God's way but never get round to it is fatal. God had warned Adam and Eve of the consequences of rejecting His guidance for their lives. Eve told the serpent: *God did say, "You must not eat fruit from the tree that is in the middle of the garden, and you must not touch it, or you will die."* (Genesis 3:3). Actually that is not what God said as Genesis 2:16-17 records the earlier conversation: <sup>16</sup> *And the Lord God commanded the man, 'You are free to eat from any tree in the garden; <sup>17</sup> but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat from it you will certainly die.'* We have no record of what kind of fruit tree it was. I suspect that the tree was an ordinary tree, but God set secure boundaries for Adam and Eve with a view to building appropriate boundaries for their relationship. The 'death' they experienced at once was spiritual, in the sense of a separation from fellowship with God. The physical death came later, but was now inevitable. The solemn and distinguishing point of the genealogy of Genesis 5 was not the long lives of the named individuals, but the phrase *and then he died*. But that is not the end of it because our eternal destiny is at stake, which John in Revelation 20:14 describes as *the second death*. There are many people who say quite openly that at some point in the future they will make their peace with God, but not just yet, often for a variety of predictable reasons. The sad reality is that there are few known later life or death bed conversions. Overwhelmingly the vast majority of people make their choices when relatively young and continue on that pathway until they die. Therefore, now, while you have the opportunity please accept Jesus as your Lord and Saviour and commit your life to follow Him.

(c) **Christians have been freed from bondage to sin** (Romans 6:17-18)<sup>17</sup> *But thanks be to God that, though you used to be slaves to sin, you have come to obey from your heart the pattern of teaching that has now claimed your allegiance.* <sup>18</sup> *You have been set free from sin and have become slaves to righteousness.* A conversion to follow Jesus is an act of self-surrender (Forsaking all I trust Him) and is a 'total, radical and exclusive obedience' (John Stott's words) to God's claims on our lives. In Matthew 6:24 Jesus put out this challenge: *'No one can serve two masters. Either you will hate the one and love the other, or you will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and Money.* For many of Paul's readers or hearers were either slaves to Roman masters or regularly came into contact with enslaved people. They knew what it meant to be in this position. However, a minority of slaves had chosen to be in that position. There were some people so poor and destitute that signing over their liberty in return for regular meals and a roof over their heads was a deal worth seeking. Paul is reminding Christians that we are to exhibit total loyalty to the Lord Jesus to whom we owe allegiance. Our priorities should be consistent with His; our choices in line with His; disciples demonstrate their commitment to their master by doing what He asks them to do and living how He asks us to live. Paul's words in Philippians 1:20-26 indicate how seriously he took his responsibilities as a disciple of Jesus. Writing from prison on account of his faith in Rome he declared: *I eagerly expect and hope that I will in no way be ashamed, but will have sufficient courage so that now as always Christ will be exalted in my body, whether by life or by death.* <sup>21</sup> *For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain.* <sup>22</sup> *If I am to go on living in the body, this will mean fruitful labour for me. Yet what shall I choose? I do not know!* <sup>23</sup> *I am torn between the two: I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far;* <sup>24</sup> *but it is more necessary for you that I remain in the body.* <sup>25</sup> *Convinced of this, I know that I will remain, and I will continue with all of you for your progress and joy in the faith,* <sup>26</sup> *so that through my being with you again your boasting in Christ Jesus will abound on account of me.* Whose disciple are you? Whose model for living do you follow?

(d)**Christian freedom is acknowledgement of a different owner** (Romans 6:22) <sup>22</sup>*But now that you have been set free from sin and have become slaves of God...* true Christianity will never lead to antinomianism, that is living in any way you choose. A true follower of Jesus who has grasped the significance of receiving the grace of God will want to naturally give Him first place in their lives. They will make the time to read His Word and pray; they will prioritise their days to attend public worship as part of a Christian congregation; their morals and values will bear the hallmark of a disciple of Jesus and be recognisable as such. This does not mean that Christians all hold the same political opinions or make all the same lifestyle choices, far from it, but their motivation for the choices they make should be based on the same core convictions. There are endless opinions people can hold or lifestyles to follow, but it is truly liberating to grasp how God wants us to live and to seek to the best of our ability to follow it. We will make mistakes and fail, but God will encourage us to get up onto our feet and try again. Philippians 2:12-13 captures what we are called to do beautifully. *Therefore, my dear friends, as you have always obeyed – not only in my presence, but now much more in my absence – continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, <sup>13</sup>for it is God who works in you to will and to act in order to fulfil his good purpose.* These verses say two things. First of all exert every effort as if your salvation depended totally on you. Secondly believe and recognise that everything depends ultimately and primarily on God –whose will will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Both are true divine sovereignty and human responsibility; to truly acknowledge both is to be freed to live the life God intends for us. The person who only accepts divine sovereignty will be useless fatalist who wastes the talents and life God has given them. The person who only accepts total human responsibility will potentially be a nervous wreck, fearing a bad decision or a foolish action could cost them their salvation. The child of God should eagerly embrace both as true and enjoy the blessings that flow from such a wise course of action!

## **2. The Commitment to a God-centred lifestyle**

There are in these verses references to ‘obeying’ and ‘obedience’. What form does this obedience take in the life of a disciple of Jesus?

(a)**An intellectual decision** This involves belief in the truth of the Gospel and a decision that I will follow Jesus. Joshua 1:7-9, with reference to Moses’ successor as leader of the people of Israel comes into this category. It states: *Be strong and very courageous. Be careful to obey all the law my servant Moses gave you; do not turn from it to the right or to the left, that you may be successful wherever you go. <sup>8</sup>Keep this Book of the Law always on your lips; meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do everything written in it. Then you will be prosperous and successful. <sup>9</sup>Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged, for the Lord your God will be with you wherever you go.* We will never have all the information about God or anything else in life. We will never have the answers to all our questions, because throughout our lives we will gain new ones, together with some of the answers. The bottom line is this –will I trust God with my life? Will I commit my life to obey His Word and follow Him?

(b)**An emotional decision** this relates to the will –it is not merely an intellectual ascent to some propositions but a heart commitment to give Jesus 100% of our lives –in each area of our lives. Abraham in Ur of the Chaldees (southern Iraq) heard the call of God to do something his family must have thought was stark raving mad. They were not believers in the God of the Bible, instead worshipping the moon god Sin. What did God say to him and what did he do? Genesis 12:1-4a states: *The Lord had said to Abram, ‘Go from your country, your people and your father’s household to the land I will show you. <sup>2</sup>I will make you into a great nation,*

*and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing.<sup>3</sup> I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you.'*

<sup>4</sup> *So Abram went, as the Lord had told him;* it must have been emotionally draining to take such a step. Throughout his entire life the promises appeared to hang by a thread. The arrival of the promised son Isaac was delayed to the stage where most people were thinking of grandchildren to visit, not having one of their own offspring! His ownership in the land consisted of little more than a grave plot and a little surrounding land for which he had paid a fortune. The idea that his descendants would own the whole land one day seemed no closer at the end of his life than when he had first entered it- yet he trusted God to keep His promises. Abraham did make mistakes and some of them are recorded in the Bible, usually they occurred when he tried to help God out by suggesting an alternative way in which a promise might be fulfilled, for example, over the conception and birth of Ishmael (Genesis 16). There are times when we too will have our doubts and fears about God's plans and purposes for our lives. When we cannot see how certain things can be accomplished. Yet the Lord calls us to trust Him. Hebrews 11:8-10 records this assessment of the secret of Abraham's life and commitment to live a life pleasing to God. *By faith Abraham, when called to go to a place he would later receive as his inheritance, obeyed and went, even though he did not know where he was going.<sup>9</sup> By faith he made his home in the promised land like a stranger in a foreign country; he lived in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise.<sup>10</sup> For he was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God.* He lived his life faithfully in the present but lived crucially in the light of what God had promised in the future. For us as Christians waiting for the second coming of Jesus and the ultimate fulfilment of God's promises in the new heavens and the new earth, the book of Revelation gives us the slightest of glimpses into the future, just enough to encourage us to keep on living for Him.

(c) **A practical decision** this is the down-to-earth aspects of discipleship; what does it look like in my home, in my workplace, in my ....? For all of us there are tests of our faith that have a huge impact on our future. For John Rockefeller, America's first oil billionaire, his mother taught him how to handle money, and most importantly how to put God first by tithing his income. Rockefeller famously declared that had he not learned how to tithe his first dollar, he could not have easily tithed his first million dollars! For Abraham, the test came in Genesis 22 –did God come first in his life, ahead of his son Isaac? In a culture of child sacrifices in Canaanite religions God both tested the faithfulness of His servant and revealed His opposition to the barbaric religious practices of the majority peoples of the land. In our lives we will have our tests when our faith is on the line. Will I trust God when...? For some people it may be difficulties in family life; for others pressures in work contexts; certainly it will be different for each one of us, but through the enabling power of the Holy Spirit we can overcome these trials. May He help each one of us to come through the test putting Him first.

### 3. **The Seriousness of the choice that we make**

(a) **The commitment we need to make** (Psalm 1; Jesus Matthew 7:13-14) There are hard choices to make which no-one can make for you. Psalm 1 in the Old Testament sets out the two ways a person might go: *Blessed is the one who does not walk in step with the wicked or stand in the way that sinners take or sit in the company of mockers,<sup>2</sup> but whose delight is in the law of the Lord, and who meditates on His law day and night.<sup>3</sup> That person is like a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season and whose leaf does not wither – whatever they do prospers.<sup>4</sup> Not so the wicked! They are like chaff that the wind blows away.<sup>5</sup> Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment, nor sinners in the assembly of the righteous.<sup>6</sup> For the Lord watches over the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked leads to destruction.* Which pathway are you

choosing to take? In the New Testament Jesus put it this way in Matthew 7:13-14: <sup>13</sup> *‘Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. <sup>14</sup> But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it.* Our choices are not to be determined by what the person sitting next to us, in front of us or behind us is doing in any given context, but what Jesus would have us do. How am I living as a disciple of Jesus? Will I keep my eyes fixed on Him? Do I need to take that step for the first time today? If this is the case- may God help you take it, because you will not regret it!

(b) **The responsibility we need to take** (Romans 6:19-23)<sup>19</sup> *I am using an example from everyday life because of your human limitations. Just as you used to offer yourselves as slaves to impurity and to ever-increasing wickedness, so now offer yourselves as slaves to righteousness leading to holiness. <sup>20</sup> When you were slaves to sin, you were free from the control of righteousness. <sup>21</sup> What benefit did you reap at that time from the things you are now ashamed of? Those things result in death! <sup>22</sup> But now that you have been set free from sin and have become slaves of God, the benefit you reap leads to holiness, and the result is eternal life. <sup>23</sup> For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.* (Romans 6:15-23) Let us make the best choices we can now in the light of eternity. Let us be comfortable now with decisions we make in this life on the day when we stand before Jesus after this life. May God help us to see things as clearly as Paul did in these words recorded in II Corinthians 5:6-10: *Therefore we are always confident and know that as long as we are at home in the body we are away from the Lord. <sup>7</sup> For we live by faith, not by sight. <sup>8</sup> We are confident, I say, and would prefer to be away from the body and at home with the Lord. <sup>9</sup> So we make it our goal to please Him, whether we are at home in the body or away from it. <sup>10</sup> For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each of us may receive what is due to us for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad.* If we follow in Paul’s footsteps then there will be no doubt whose disciple we are, for Jesus’ sake, Amen.