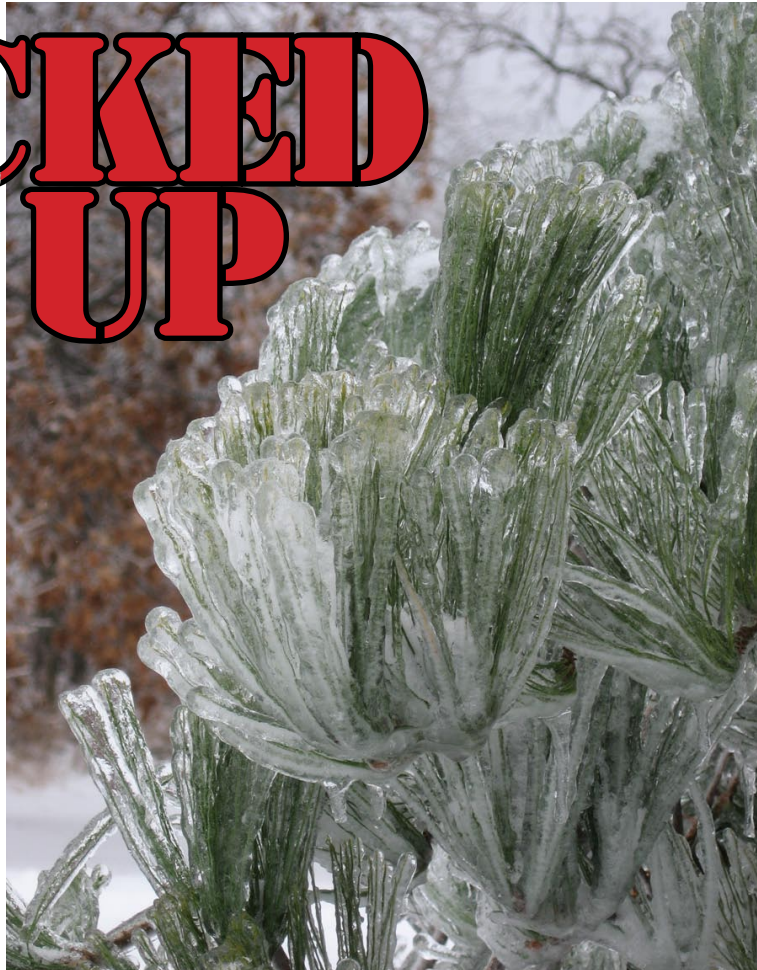


LOCKED UP

Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom.

2 Corinthians 3:17 NIV

IT SEEMS BEAUTIFUL AT FIRST.

THE TREES HAVE BEEN GRACED

BY A GARMENT OF SPARKLING

DIAMONDS. LIKE BLOWN-GLASS

DELICACIES, THEIR EVERY SUR-

FACE IS SHEATHED IN GLISTEN-

ING CRYSTAL.

O vernight rain has fallen from the upper reaches, from a warm air mass lying atop the frigid air at the earth's surface. So atop the blanket of snow, what began as liquid has quickly frozen on contact, leaving a thickening crust. Naked trees and bushes drip with rain, but quickly build up layers of ice on every branch, every twig, every lingering bud. Soon every living and dead thing is sheathed in a beautiful but deadly shroud.

The air crackles like the sound of unbounded electricity. As the slight breeze moves the branches they creak and complain, the thick ice cracks and groans. And then, from deep in the woods, comes the sound of a loud tearing and a thudding crash as a large tree limb, burdened by the extra weight, falls to the ground. Dead limbs nearer the house, already weak, come crashing down first, littering the snow with the explosion of their bits and pieces. Then, with a nauseating *whump*, a large limb from the locust tree in the front yard plummets to earth, sending vibrations through the house.

Bushes and flexible tree limbs bow precipitously to the ground under their new, leaden weight, turning even the mighty oak into a weeping willow. Every surface is hermetically sealed, locked inside a frozen prison of ice.

Like the living things outside, we humans, too, are locked up by the ice. Travel on the ice-coated roads is unthinkable. Even stepping outside the house is perilous, as ice covers the back steps, the deck, the driveway. Icicles garland the eaves and rain gutters. Odd, mushroom-shaped stalagmites litter the lawn and driveway, where ice has built up on individual blades of grass that poked above the snow surface.

Appointments must be cancelled. Mail will not be delivered. We are grateful that we still have electricity (not all do), but the ice storm has effectively locked us up in our home, imprisoning us for the time being.

DEMEANING LICENSE

From birth each of us are indoctrinated by society to believe that we are “free.” Slavery is no more (at least outside the shadows) and individual liberty reigns. In the United States we have the *Bill of Rights*—the first ten amendments to the US Constitution—which confers upon our citizens essential freedoms: freedom of speech, freedom of the press, freedom of religion, the right to bear arms, the right against unreasonable searches, States’ rights.

Like modern Pharisees taking over the interpretation and implementation of not the Ten Commandments but the Ten Rights, our liberalized society has expanded these rights to include personal liberties never imagined by the founding fathers. So now the individual’s “rights” include freedom *from* religion, the freedom to kill unborn life, the freedom to prevent any speech one deems objectionable, the freedom to take another man as one’s wife, or another woman as one’s husband.

Today the exquisite genius of freedom and liberty has devolved into putrid license. Where liberty exalts, license demeans. More than that, it is all a lie.

For even though they knew God, they did not honor Him as God or give thanks, but they became futile in their speculations, and their foolish heart was darkened. Professing to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the incorruptible God for an image in the form of corruptible man and of birds and four-footed animals and crawling creatures. Therefore God gave them over in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, so that their bodies would be dishonored among them. For they exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever. Amen.

Romans 1:21-25

The truth is, man is born in slavery and, save for one critical decision, remains in that condition. Man is born in slavery to flesh, slavery to himself, slavery to the god of this world.

And you were dead in your trespasses and sins, in which you formerly walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, of the spirit that is now working in the sons of disobedience.

Ephesians 2:1-2

Like a tree limb shrouded in crystal clear ice, man thinks his freedom is as boundless as his clear, limitless sight. But it is all a lie, for in truth he is locked up, chained to the earth, his feet frozen to the soil from which he came.

TRUE FREEDOM

But over two thousand years ago, in a small village in Judah, God the Father sent His Son to be born of a virgin. Jesus Christ came to offer a way out of the prison of fleshly conceit, the padlocked chains of sin and anger and lies. “In Him was life, and the life was the light of men.” The spotless Lamb was born into this world so that His sinless flesh could be sacrificed for flesh locked in depravity.

In this babe of Bethlehem was freedom—*true* freedom. Not the artificial liberties imagined by man or the father of lies; not the cynical constructions of license masquerading as freedom; not the mere *perception* of freedom as imagined from within a glass-walled prison. Jesus brought with Him the way—the *only* way—to real life, the fresh invigorating breath of true liberty.

And the book of the prophet Isaiah was handed to Him. And He opened the book and found the place where it was written,

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon Me,
Because He anointed Me to preach the gospel to the poor.
He has sent Me to proclaim release to the captives,
And recovery of sight to the blind,
To set free those who are oppressed,
To proclaim the favorable year of the Lord.”

And He closed the book, gave it back to the attendant and sat down; and the eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on Him. And He began to say to them, “Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”

Luke 4:17-21

The terrible thing, the almost impossible thing, is to hand over your whole self—all of your wishes and precautions—to Christ. But it is far easier than what we are all trying to do instead. For what we are trying to do is to remain what we call “ourselves,” to keep personal happiness as our great aim in life, and yet at the same time be “good.” We are all trying to let our mind and heart go their own way—centered on money or pleasure or ambition—and hoping, in spite of this, to behave honestly and chastely and humbly. And that is exactly what Christ warned us you could not do. As He said, a thistle cannot produce figs. If I am a field that contains nothing but grass seed, I cannot produce wheat. Cutting the grass may keep it short: but I shall still produce grass and no wheat. If I want to produce wheat, the change must go deeper than the surface, I must be ploughed up and re-sown.

C.S. Lewis