

Exodus 13:17-15:21, *The Path to Freedom*

At this time I want to invite you to open your Bibles with me to Exodus 13, beginning at vs. 17. God had seen the suffering of His people in Egypt. They had survived Pharaoh's policies of ethnic cleansing, they had languished as slaves under Egypt's cruel whip, but that was all about to change. God came to rescue Israel and lead them out of Egypt and into a good and spacious land.¹ I'm going to read from Exodus 13:17 until the end of chapter 14.

17 When Pharaoh let the people go, God did not lead them on the road through the Philistine country, though that was shorter. For God said, "If they face war, they might change their minds and return to Egypt." 18 So God led the people around by the desert road toward the Red Sea. The Israelites went up out of Egypt ready for battle...21 By day the Lord went ahead of them in a pillar of cloud to guide them on their way and by night in a pillar of fire to give them light, so that they could travel by day or night. 22 Neither the pillar of cloud by day nor the pillar of fire by night left its place in front of the people.

14 Then the Lord said to Moses, 2 "Tell the Israelites to turn back... 3 Pharaoh will think, 'The Israelites are wandering around the land in confusion, hemmed in by the desert.' 4 And I will harden Pharaoh's heart, and he will pursue them. But I will gain glory for myself through Pharaoh and all his army, and the Egyptians will know that I am the Lord." So the Israelites did this.

5 When the king of Egypt was told that the people had fled, Pharaoh and his officials changed their minds about them and said, "What have we done? We have let the Israelites go and have lost their

services!" 6 So he had his chariot made ready and took his army with him. 7 He took six hundred of the best chariots, along with all the other chariots of Egypt, with officers over all of them. 8 The Lord hardened the heart of Pharaoh king of Egypt, so that he pursued the Israelites, who were marching out boldly. 9 The Egyptians—all Pharaoh's horses and chariots, horsemen[c] and troops—pursued the Israelites and overtook them as they camped by the sea...

10 As Pharaoh approached, the Israelites looked up, and there were the Egyptians, marching after them. They were terrified and cried out to the Lord. 11 They said to Moses, "Was it because there were no graves in Egypt that you brought us to the desert to die? What have you done to us by bringing us out of Egypt? 12 Didn't we say to you in Egypt, 'Leave us alone; let us serve the Egyptians'? It would have been better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die in the desert!" 13 Moses answered the people, "Do not be afraid. Stand firm and you will see the deliverance the Lord will bring you today. The Egyptians you see today you will never see again. 14 The Lord will fight for you; you need only to be still."

15 Then the Lord said to Moses, "Why are you crying out to me? Tell the Israelites to move on. 16 Raise your staff and stretch out your hand over the sea to divide the water so that the Israelites can go through the sea on dry ground. 17 I will harden the hearts of the Egyptians so that they will go in after them. And I will gain glory through Pharaoh and all his army, through his chariots and his horsemen. 18 The Egyptians will know that I am the Lord when I gain glory through Pharaoh, his chariots and his horsemen."

¹ Exodus 3:7-8.

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19 Then the angel of God, who had been traveling in front of Israel's army, withdrew and went behind them. The pillar of cloud also moved from in front and stood behind them, 20 coming between the armies of Egypt and Israel. Throughout the night the cloud brought darkness to the one side and light to the other side; so neither went near the other all night long.

21 Then Moses stretched out his hand over the sea, and all that night the Lord drove the sea back with a strong east wind and turned it into dry land. The waters were divided, 22 and the Israelites went through the sea on dry ground, with a wall of water on their right and on their left. 23 The Egyptians pursued them, and all Pharaoh's horses and chariots and horsemen followed them into the sea. 24 During the last watch of the night the Lord looked down from the pillar of fire and cloud at the Egyptian army and threw it into confusion. 25 He jammed[d] the wheels of their chariots so that they had difficulty driving. And the Egyptians said, "Let's get away from the Israelites! The Lord is fighting for them against Egypt."

26 Then the Lord said to Moses, "Stretch out your hand over the sea so that the waters may flow back over the Egyptians and their chariots and horsemen." 27 Moses stretched out his hand over the sea, and at daybreak the sea went back to its place. The Egyptians were fleeing toward[e] it, and the Lord swept them into the sea. 28 The water flowed back and covered the chariots and horsemen—the entire army of Pharaoh that had followed the Israelites into the sea. Not one of them survived.

29 But the Israelites went through the sea on dry ground, with a wall of water on their right and on their left. 30 That day the Lord saved Israel from the hands of the Egyptians, and Israel saw the Egyptians

lying dead on the shore. 31 And when the Israelites saw the mighty hand of the Lord displayed against the Egyptians, the people feared the Lord and put their trust in him and in Moses his servant."

A. Is God really good? Over the last few weeks, we've taken a closer look at the events leading up to Israel leaving Egypt. God commanded Pharaoh to let Israel go but he refused—it took 10 separate plagues before Pharaoh relented. This morning's text describes another blow to Egypt—her army was completely destroyed as they pursued Israel into the Sea. The question is, *what do these stories tell us about God? Is God good, just, and righteous? Or is He angry, vengeful, and evil?*

I want to take a few minutes to address the accusations that some contemporary readers raise concerning God. We live in an age that is fiercely independent, and it follows that in order to protect our individual rights and freedoms we need to adopt an anti-authority mindset. A person in authority, who has been given a measure of power, is a potential threat to my way of life, therefore, we tend to view them with suspicion. As Lord John Acton once said, "Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely. Great men are almost always bad men".

This is the premise that drove the blockbuster film "Batman vs. Superman;" Lex Luther, Batman, and U.S. Congress were all agreed on one thing—someone with Superman's power could not be trusted to be good. Follow the logic for a moment...if absolute power corrupts absolutely, then God might be the least trustworthy and most dangerous Person in the universe.

Some look at the plagues, or the account of the Red Sea and conclude that they have all the evidence they need to convict God of wrongdoing. I've heard more than a few suggest that Pharaoh got a raw deal, that he was the victim, and God the All-Powerful-Bully. This kind of reading of the text certainly finds traction in our day, but it doesn't hold up under scrutiny.

1. First, Pharaoh was not an innocent victim. Properly understood, a "victim" is powerless, unable to say "no," and forced into doing something that brings dishonour, shame, or injury to oneself. At the time of Exodus, Pharaoh was the most powerful man on the face of the earth, and his absolute power had corrupted absolutely. Under his leadership, and the leadership of his father, Pharaoh had instituted policies of oppression, forced labour, and ethnic cleansing—at minimum, tens of thousands of Israelites were killed under his regime.

Some suggest that God was severe in sending 10 plagues, ignoring the truth that Pharaoh could have avoided them all together if he had been willing to surrender to God's purposes. Pharaoh refused to bend to God—he refused to stop his regime of oppression, slavery, and murder—and all of Egypt paid the price for his stubborn refusal.

2. Second, God isn't a Bully. 400 years before the Exodus, in the book of Genesis, we read about God's mercy towards Egypt. In the time of Joseph, a severe famine was going to sweep through Egypt and God warned Pharaoh in advance. This warning saved the lives of everyone in Egypt and the surrounding nations. God is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness.

Before God sent the 1st plague, God gave Pharaoh an opportunity to

mend his ways, to let Israel go, Pharaoh could have chosen to comply, but, as they say, Pharaoh chose to learn the hard way. Pharaoh was a slow learner indeed! He eventually let Israel go, but Ex. 14:5 tells us that he and his officials "*changed their minds.*" Pharaoh called for the army and chased after them—his plan was to bring them back in chains. His choice led his army into the Sea, and the army perished as a result.

3. We don't live in a consequence-free world. Some push back saying, "*But how could a good God punish Egypt for Pharaoh's choices? That's not fair!*" As gently as I can, I want to say that "fair" doesn't have anything to do with it. Was it fair for Pharaoh to murder all male, Israelite, babies? Of course it wasn't, but a succession of Egyptian kings made choices that had devastating effects on generations of Israelites.

The kind of world people long for is not the kind of world God has made. In a cause and effect universe, there is a power in our choices. The freedom to choose is both the privilege and price of being human—with freedom comes the responsibility to bear the consequences of our choice. God is not a Western Individualist—He hasn't created a world to house 7 billion people, each person like a self-contained silo, with thoughts, desires, words, and activity only affecting oneself.

At the centre of the universe is a relationship: God has revealed Himself as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. And all of us are born into a web of relationships that expands with age. Just think about the family you were born into; your relationships with father, mother, sister, and brother profoundly affects your life. Think about the school you went to, the friendship circle you keep, the person you

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married, the company you work for—to be a person is to be caught up in a web of relationships—we all affect one another.

If only my sinful choices, my selfish choices, my angry choices only affected me! But our choices don't work that way, do they? Like a stone thrown into a still pond, our choices produce a ripple that affects the entire pond. Lying affects the people around me, so does greed, pride, self-sufficiency, anger, alcoholism, and lust.

The Canadian Band, *Great Big Sea*, once wrote: “*Wouldn't it be great, if the band just never ended; we could stay out late and we would never hear last call. We wouldn't need to worry about approval or permission, we could slip off the edge and never worry about the fall. I wanna be consequence free, I wanna to be where nothing needs to matter.*” Great Big Sea isn't the first to express this kind of sentiment, and they won't be the last, the trouble is that we don't live in this kind of world, and neither did Pharaoh.

B. At this time I want to shift gears and talk about **the path to freedom**. I think most of us would agree that Israel's story is more extreme than most of ours—God led them out of Egypt, out of centuries of slavery and oppression. But I believe there's something for us in their story—we know the same God, He hasn't changed, and He is still able to rescue and save. *Are you enslaved? Bound? Stuck?* God sees, He cares, and He desires your freedom. This morning I want to offer you two truths, taken from Israel's story, that can be brought to bear upon your story.

1. Here's the first: **the path to freedom may not be the straight line we expect.**

Exodus 13:17-18 says, “*When Pharaoh let the people go, God did not lead them on the road through the Philistine country, though that was shorter. For God said, 'If they face war, they might change their minds and return to Egypt.' 18 So God led the people around by the desert road toward the Red Sea.*”

Instead of taking Israel by the main road to the Promised Land, God took the scenic route—He knew that Israel was a fragile nation and couldn't face the threat of war; they skirted around the Philistine land to avoid trouble. But essentially God led them out of the proverbial frying pan and into the fire; the Israelites found themselves stuck between the uncrossable Red Sea and the armies of Egypt.

You see, as soon as Israel left Egypt, Pharaoh and his officials regretted the decision to let them go. Pharaoh said to himself, “*The God of Israel cannot have them; they are mine—I own them.*” Pharaoh gathered his armies and left Egypt in hot pursuit.

How did Israel respond? Ex. 14:10-12 says, “*They were terrified and cried out to the Lord. 11 They said to Moses, 'Was it because there were no graves in Egypt that you brought us to the desert to die? What have you done to us by bringing us out of Egypt? 12 Didn't we say to you in Egypt, 'Leave us alone; let us serve the Egyptians'? It would have been better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die in the desert!*”

The path to freedom has a nice sound to it, and we fully expect this path to be well-marked, straight, and level, but it is rarely so. The very idea of freedom implies its opposite—bondage, burden, slavery. Leaving Egypt hadn't fundamentally changed their sense of identity,

not yet—they still saw themselves as slaves. At the first sight of Pharaoh they were begging to go back to Egypt.

Are we so different? Proverbs 26:11 would never win a politically correct award, but it makes powerful statement about our tendencies. *“As a dog returns to its vomit, so fools repeat their folly.”* Though we long to be free, more often than not, we continue to live as slaves, repeating the same mistakes and behaviour, reinforcing the chains that keep us bound.

illus: when I was in Bible school, I was involved in chaplain work in a medium security prison. One afternoon a week a few of us would drive to prison and spend the afternoon talking with inmates. After a few weeks, you quickly discover who wants to talk and who doesn't—Garth was someone who wanted to talk.

As the months went by we got to know one another, and Garth began to share his story with me. The first time he went to prison was shortly after he turned 18, when I met Garth he would have been in his late 30's—he had been in out of jail for 20 years, more in than out. When I found out he was up for parole later that year, I asked what he was going to do when he got out.

Quite matter of factly he said, *“Oh, I'll probably steal something, get caught, and be back here in no time.”* “You've got to be kidding!” I said to him, “why would you want to come back to this place?” I'll never forget his response. *“Mark, I've spent so much time in jail, it's the only place I really feel at home. In prison I get three meals a day, a warm bed, and a hot shower. I have friends in here, I know what to expect in here, but I don't know what to expect out there—out there I feel afraid.”*

Fear is a powerful motivator, and it frequently stands in the way of our freedom—the fear of the unknown, the fear of walking the path to freedom but failing miserably. Breaking free from what binds us is difficult; freedom requires transformation, and transformation is slow, painful, messy work. Along the path to freedom we must face our own monsters—facing our fears, opening up old wounds, admitting our inadequacies, and addressing the needs, desires, habits, behaviours, and relationships that led to our enslavement.

Are you enslaved? Bound? Stuck? Do you want to be free? The good news is that no one need walk the path to freedom alone—God will go before us and beside us, strengthening weak knees and feeble feet.

The first truth taken from Israel's story is that the path to freedom is that the path to freedom may not be the straight line we expect; here's the second:

2. The path to freedom requires God's presence, power, and direction.

It was God who rescued Israel, and it was God who went out before them leading the way. Exodus 13:21-22 says, *“By day the Lord went ahead of them in a pillar of cloud to guide them on their way and by night in a pillar of fire to give them light, so that they could travel by day or night. Neither the pillar of cloud by day nor the pillar of fire by night left its place in front of the people.”*

Later, as Pharaoh's army closed in on Israel, Moses spoke to the people saying, *“Do not be afraid. Stand firm and you will see the deliverance the Lord will bring you today. The Egyptians you see*

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*today you will never see again. The Lord will fight for you; you need only to be still.*²

The One who calls us into freedom is the One who walks the path with us, the One who fights for us. By day the Lord went ahead of them to guide them, by night He gave them light so they could walk the path. Has God changed? No! He is the same God, the One who goes ahead by day, our Leader, our Guide. Will He leave us in the dark night, alone and afraid? No! Psalm 42:8 says, *“By day the Lord directs his love, at night his song is with me”*.

Only God can strengthen our will, only God can forgive our sin, heal our wounds, redeem our identity, and renew our hope. Only God can release us from fear; only God can break our chains. The path to freedom requires God’s presence, power, and direction, and the good news is that Jesus has already walked the path for us.

Hebrews 2:10 describes Jesus as the pioneer of our salvation; Hebrews 12:2 describes Jesus as the pioneer and perfecter of our faith. Jesus is our Pioneer, out in front, blazing a trail, leading us on a path that leads to life. Jesus has already walked the path that leads to freedom, a path that led Him to the cross. Since we are flesh and blood, He shared in our humanity, and in doing so He bore our chains, our wounds, our addictions in His own body. Romans 6 tells us that when Jesus died on the cross, we died with Him, that we might no longer be slaves to sin.

² Exodus 14:13-14

³ Exodus 15:1-3, 13, 18.

Jesus is out in front—leading the way—but He is not so far out in front that He’s left us to straggle behind: He goes before us, beside us, and within us on this path to freedom. If you choose to walk this path, you will not be alone.

Conclusion: I want to conclude this morning by directing your attention back to our text—the crossing of the Red Sea culminated in songs of praise sung by Moses and Miriam.

Their enemy was defeated, they were rescued, and for the first time they had a taste of freedom. *“I will sing to the Lord, for he is highly exalted. Both horse and driver he has hurled into the sea. The Lord is my strength and my defence, he has become my salvation. He is my God, and I will praise him, my father’s God, and I will exalt him. The Lord is a warrior; the Lord is his name...In your unfailing love you will lead the people you have redeemed. In your strength you will guide them to your holy dwelling...The Lord reigns for ever and ever.”*³

The next few chapters of Exodus will reveal that Israel still had much to learn about freedom—there was a whole more that they needed to be set free from. But, but, the song Moses and Miriam sang still speaks today—about who God is, about what He did, what He can still do. Moses’ God was strong; how strong is your God? Miriam’s God was present; how present is your God?

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This morning I want to invite you to put your trust in the Lord's unfailing love, He will lead us, He will redeem us. There is nothing He cannot do, there is no chain He cannot break—especially not yours. Come to Him, cry out to Him, rest in Him and claim the freedom that is yours in Christ.

Worship

Benediction