

Leaving Slavery Behind

[Exodus 14:10-14, 14:21-22](#)

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[Real Audio \(2 MB\)](#)

For the next three months we will join the Hebrews on their forty-year pilgrimage through the wilderness into the Promised Land. It was a journey from slavery to freedom, from fear to trust, and from despair to hope.

We are all on this journey today, somewhere between leaving slavery and fully entering the promises of God. There was a day when some of us were enslaved to anger, hurt, or guilt. Others of us were enslaved to work, money, or collecting trophies. Still others to alcohol, victimization, or a destructive promiscuity. But God will not settle for anything, be it your sin or the sin of others, that binds your heart and prevents you from being all you were created to be. That is why the Gospel is always a story about freedom.

The liberating promise of the Bible is that Jesus rose from the dead that you too may be raised to a new life with him. The resurrection throws open the door of the tomb where you were enslaved and invites you to enter the places of freedom, change and healing, community, vocation, and calling. This what the Apostle Paul meant when he called us to leave the old creature behind and become a new creation in Christ. But that kind of change doesn't happen overnight. It takes some growing and maturing. It takes a journey.

No one ever goes from being a runaway slave to prancing into the Promised Land. No, you have to spend time on the wilderness journey where you learn to walk like a man or woman who is free. Because you can only enter the Promised Land if you are no longer acting like a slave. Some have recently started the journey to freedom. Others have been walking with God a long time. But none of us have arrived, have we?

Along the the journey to this Promised Land, we question and struggle to understand what God is doing. We wonder if we are lost. We wonder who were kidding, thinking that we could escape our past. We battle some terrific giants. And we grow very, very impatient with the length of this wilderness journey.

In the thirteenth chapter of Exodus, we are told that there were two possible ways to get from Egypt, where the Hebrews had been enslaved, to the Promised Land. One way was to take the road called "The Way of the Philistines." This was a highway that ran along the coast of the Mediterranean Sea. It was a heavily traveled trade route with lots of water, rest areas, and restaurants along the way. But God led the people south, "by the roundabout way of the wilderness" where there was no road, bridges, nor water to drink. On the southern route all the Hebrews saw was the expansive Red Sea, and a whole lot of lonely desert after that.

Why does God always seem to take us on the hard roundabout way? Why doesn't he ever lead us onto Easy Street? Because the purpose of this journey, the purpose of your life, is to learn how to walk with God. You are not going to learn that by taking the Way of the Philistines. The Philistines tell you that all you need is a law degree, medical degree, or MBA. Or they say that all you need is to get married, have kids, own a home. The Philistines offer one well-worn road to success after another. But has any of that led to freedom for you? No, because freedom doesn't come from getting to your dreams quickly. Freedom is won from the inside out.

This means that freedom is found on the hard road, where you lose all your other dreams and realize the only dream left is to know this God who walks with you. Freedom is found not by getting your life to the right place, but by seeing the presence of God. When you see God, then you can see that anything is possible. Only then are you free. So wherever in the desert you discover God, well, that is the right place.

Every freedom story has a beginning, and this one begins with the Hebrews running away from Pharaoh. They don't get far until they run right into the shores of the Red Sea. About that time they look back to see Pharaoh and all his chariots coming after them. Ahead of them is their first obstacle and behind them is the opportunity to return to slavery. Then we are told, "In great fear the Israelites cried out to the Lord. They said to Moses, Was it because there were no graves in Egypt that you have taken us away to die in the wilderness? What have you done to us bringing us out of Egypt? Is this not the very thing we told you in Egypt, 'Let us alone and let us serve the Egyptians?'" Exodus 14:10-12.

Notice how many times the word Egypt comes up in those verses. No one is talking about the Promised Land, freedom, or the Lord. All they are talking about is what they left behind. That's because they are scared, and when people are scared they will always trade in their freedom for security.

So let us be clear: when God opens up the Red Sea to allow the Hebrews to walk away from Pharaoh and slavery, it is not because he is moved by their great faith. They have no faith! That's what they will learn in the desert. At this point all they have is fear, which the Bible understands as the opposite of faith.

When people become fearful, they always prefer the misery they know to the mystery they do not. But out of sheer grace God will insist on leaving slavery, because God will never settle for what you will. He'll pull you into freedom even when you are too afraid to want to begin the journey. In speaking to a recovering alcoholic recently, I commented that it must be great finally to be living with sobriety. He surprised me by saying, "Frankly all my worst fears of sobriety have proven true. Now I have to deal with reality and that is pretty hard. I'm not sober because I decided it was better. I was too addicted to make good choices. I'm sober because God saved my life."

We all begin the journey into freedom, not because we choose it, but because God does. We were too addicted to slavery and too frightened to leave. But God intervenes, parts the waters, and pushes us through. Sometimes grace has a severe edge. You may find that one day you lose the job you hated. That's a severe grace. One day you may lose the money that never made you happy, or the beauty that was never beautiful enough. On that day you will think it is the end of your life, but it is only the end of your slavery.

Notice that when the people are afraid, they complain to Moses. You might want to get used to that phrase, "And the people complained to Moses," because you're going to see it a lot over the course of this journey. Right from the beginning, let us be clear that the reason we complain is because we are afraid. This is one of the reasons Washington, D.C. exists. The nation easily becomes afraid and wants a place to complain. We used to be afraid of war and poverty. Now we are afraid every time the Dow drops a few points. So everyone asks our leaders, "What are you doing? Fix it!" What they really want to say is take our fear away, but no human leader can do that.

If you find yourself in leadership of an office, classroom, the nation, or hardest of all, your family, and you start to hear complaints, don't rush to service all that whining. Because it's a black hole and you'll never fill it up. See the complaints for what they are--fear. More fear than you can ever calm down. You're just Moses, and like him, you may not have wanted this job in the first place. Notice that Moses doesn't try to manage all this fear. He doesn't set up a task force to negotiate a compromise with Pharaoh. Instead, "Moses said to the people, 'Do not be afraid, stand firm, and see the deliverance that the Lord will accomplish for you today.'" The people could only see Pharaoh's chariots. Moses told them to lift their eyes to see the Lord's deliverance. That's the mark of a leader. Leaders help people see something greater, more over-whelming, than their fears.

The leadership that the church offers is to help you see that in your baptism you too have passed through the waters. You too have already left slavery behind and you are on your way to the Promised Land. You may long for the familiar old life along the way in the journey when you get afraid. But the overwhelming news is that Jesus Christ has already led you out of slavery. He insists on your freedom, and out in the desert he'll show you how to keep it.

Perhaps today you find yourself exactly where the Hebrews are at this point in the journey. Behind you is the opportunity to return to the slavery you have known for too long. Behind you are just a whole lot of loneliness, compromised dreams, hurt, compulsive living, and guilt. You hate that old life. In fact, it is

sucking the life out of you. Ahead of you lie the parted waters of baptism that lead to an unknown future with God.

You don't actually have a choice. Not if you want to really live. It's time to start walking ahead.

O God, do what we are too afraid to do for ourselves. Pull us into freedom. Bring us to places where we have no choice but to walk with you, that we may discover the joy of being fully alive. Amen.