

God Liberates  
Exodus 3:1–12; 20:1–21  
Sunday, September 26, 2021

Last week we started our look at the first five books of the Bible – Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy – referred to as the *Pentateuch*. We’re going to look at one book each week, getting a sense of what that book is *about*, *when* it was written, *why* that matters, and where we as Christians see Christ in these books. We started with Genesis, saying that it was written sometime around the years 700–500 BC, when the people of Israel had been invaded and conquered by Assyria and Babylon and were sent away to live in exile. These stories had been told orally for centuries, but it was *then* that they said, “Our way of life is under threat. We need to write these stories down so that they aren’t lost forever.” And we talked about how the fact that they wrote these stories during the experience of exile shaped how they told them. These stories of the origin of their faith spoke to the situation they were facing in exile.

And what we said about Genesis was that this entire book is a story about *creation*. Not just that God created “in the beginning,” but that God *creates*; God brings order out of chaos and makes life possible. And for us, as Christians, we hear scripture talking about how Christ was “in the beginning with God,” and, “all things came into being through him.” That the God of creation was made known to us in Jesus Christ, and *we* are a part of God’s ongoing creation; God’s ability to bring order out of chaos and make life possible for *us, today*.

At the end of Genesis, the people of Israel – Jacob and his twelve sons and their families, totaling 70 people – moved from the land of Canaan to Egypt because there was a famine in Canaan, but there was food in Egypt. So they settle there. Hundreds of years pass, and the people of Israel have multiplied in Egypt to the point that Pharaoh, the king of Egypt, starts to get nervous. He looks around and says, “There are *so many* Israelites – more of *them* than *us* – what if they

decide to join our enemies and defeat us?” So they make *slaves* of the Israelites. More time passes, and the people of Israel are firmly entrenched in their slavery; it has become their way of life. It is brutal and oppressive. The Egyptians even start killing their children when they are born, so that the Israelites won’t outnumber them.

That is the situation that we find at the beginning of the book of Exodus. The people of Israel have been living in slavery in Egypt for around 400 years. They are experiencing *immense* pain and suffering. And they are crying out to God to *save* them and *deliver* them.

Like Genesis, the book of Exodus is thought to have been written around the years 700–500 BC, when the people of Israel were living in exile in foreign lands. So think about that for a second. The people of Israel, who have been invaded, conquered, made into slaves, and forced to live in foreign lands, are writing this story about a time when the people of Israel were slaves in a foreign land. You think there might have been some connection there; that their experience of exile might have shaped how they told *that* story, and *that* story of Exodus might have spoken to their current situation? This is a story *about* exiled slaves being told *by* exiled slaves, *to* exiled slaves. But what this story is primarily about is their *liberation* from slavery. The very title, *Exodus*, comes from a Greek word that means, “the way out.” It is about God providing the way out, setting them free, and leading them back home.

Imagine that you are an Israelite living in exile in Babylon (what we know today as Iraq), and you hear this story of Exodus, where God says, “I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed, I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them from the Egyptians, and to bring them up out of that land.” That might give you hope that God observes *your* misery, God hears *your* cries,

God knows *your* sufferings, and God will deliver *you*. The hope of this story is not just that God *liberated*, but that God *liberates*.

And there are *all kinds of things* that we need to be liberated from, aren't there? For some people, it is a *physical* bondage like prison (especially those who are *wrongly* imprisoned), abusive relationships, or the estimated 20 million people around the world today who are living in slavery. They are longing, crying out to be set free. For others, it's a kind of mental, emotional, or spiritual bondage; that we are prisoners or slaves in our hearts or minds. We need to be set free from addictions and prejudices and fear; from anger and hatred; from beliefs or ideologies that are hurting *us* or the people *around* us. There are all kinds of things in our lives that we need to be *liberated* from so that we can truly *live* the fullness of life that Christ offers. And so *our* hope is the same as that of the people of Israel – that God observes *our* misery, hears *our* cries, knows *our* sufferings, and that God will deliver *us*. Not just that God *liberated*, but that God *liberates*. That *we* can be *free* from whatever it is that has a hold on us.

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Now, before we go any further, I want to tell you two quick stories. The first is about Harriet Tubman (a name that most of us know). Harriet Tubman was born into slavery on a plantation in Maryland in 1822. She spent the first 27 years of her life as a slave. In 1849, she finally escaped and, after several weeks, made it to Philadelphia, where she was finally free. That would have been a good enough ending to her story. That's liberation. She could have lived out the rest of her life in freedom and peace. But instead, she thought back to the people that she had been enslaved *with*. She said, "My father, my mother, my brothers and sisters and friends were still slaves. But *I* was free, and *they* should be free."

She went *back* to Maryland and helped her niece and her family escape. Then she went back *again* and helped her brother and two other men escape. She went back again and again and again over the course of 13 years, helping at least 70 other people escape. She provided instructions for dozens *more* people to escape slavery through the Underground Railroad. Harriet Tubman could have just enjoyed the rest of her life in freedom. But she *used* her freedom to help free *others*.

The second story is about a man named Bill Wilson (probably not a name that a lot of us know). Bill was born in Vermont in 1895. He served with distinction in World War I, then came home, got married to a wonderful, loving wife, and had a very successful career in the stock market. He had liked to drink since his time in the military, but with the stock market crash of 1929, he lost everything, and his drinking got bad. By 1933, he ended up being committed to a hospital in New York four times, where the doctors ultimately told him that he would either *die* from his drinking or have to be committed for the rest of his life.

But one night during that fourth stay in the hospital, his old drinking buddy came to visit him and told him that he had been sober for several weeks under the guidance of a Christian group that he was a part of. Lying in his hospital bed, Bill cried out, "I'll do anything! Anything at all! If there be a God, let Him show Himself!" Suddenly, Bill said, he had the sensation of a bright light, a feeling of ecstasy, and a new serenity. And he never drank again for the rest of his life.

Again, it would be a good enough story if it ended there. He could have enjoyed a successful career and a happy life with his wife, living out the rest of his days in freedom and peace. But he thought about all the people he used to drink with. He started going out and pulling drunks off the street and letting them stay in his home, trying to get *them* sober. And then once, on a

business trip to Ohio, he met a man named Bob Smith, who was also an alcoholic. Bill helped get *him* sober, and the two of them teamed up to form a group called Alcoholics Anonymous, which since 1938 has helped set *millions* of men and women free from addiction. He could have just enjoyed the rest of his life in freedom and peace. But he *used* his freedom to help free *others*.

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I want us to keep these two stories in mind as we think about the book of Exodus. Exodus can be neatly divided into two parts. The first half, chapters 1–19, is the story of God liberating the people of Israel from slavery in Egypt. The second half, chapters 20–40, is the story of God giving the law to Moses and the people of Israel. So they are set free from slavery in Egypt, and then they go out into the wilderness where God gives them the Ten Commandments and the rest of God’s law. Exodus is not *just* a story about *liberation*, it is *also* a story about *law*. And those two halves might seem to be at *odds* with one another. They are *set free* only to be given this whole set of *rules* that they now have to follow?

It helps us, though, to understand the *purpose* of the law. Look at the Ten Commandments that we read earlier. The first four commandments are all about honoring God – have no gods before me, you shall not make idols, you shall not make wrongful use of the name of the Lord, and you shall remember the sabbath day and keep it holy. They are about the ways that we show love for God. The other six commandments are about the ways that we honor *one another* – honor your father and mother, do not commit murder, do not commit adultery, do not steal, do not bear false witness against your neighbor, do not covet your neighbor’s house or wife or anything that belongs to them. They are about the ways that we show love for our *neighbor*.

This is why, when Jesus is asked which commandment is the greatest, which law is the *most important* to follow, he summarizes the law by saying, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and all your soul and all your mind, and love your neighbor as yourself.” This wasn’t just a bunch of rules that the people of Israel had to follow. This was God ordering their life together in such a way that they could love *God* and love *one another*. That is the *purpose* of the law; to show love for God and our neighbor.

So the people of Israel are liberated from 400 years of slavery in Egypt. That would have been a good enough story, right? But God doesn’t just set them loose in the wilderness and say, “Alright, you’re free! Go on home now! Go live your life and do whatever you want.” God liberates them and then structures their life around love for God and love for neighbor. God set them free so that they could live for God and for one another. They are *liberated to love*.

Harriet Tubman was liberated from slavery, and she *used* her liberation to live for God and for others; in ways that *showed love* for God and for her neighbor. Bill Wilson was liberated from addiction, and he *used* his liberation to live for God and for others; in ways that *showed love* for God and for his neighbor. What do *we* need to be liberated from? What *have* we been liberated from, and how can we *use* our liberation in ways that live for God and one another, in ways that *show love* for God and one another, in ways that *help set others free*?

Paul says this very thing to the Christians in Galatia, “For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters; only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become slaves to one another. For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself’” (Galatians 5:13–14). And Peter says a similar thing in his first letter, “As servants of God, live as free people, yet do not use your freedom as a pretext for

evil. Honor everyone. Love the family of believers. Fear God” (1 Peter 2:16–17). God *has* and *can* set us free from that which holds us captive, whether it is physical or mental, emotional, spiritual. But we are not just free to do whatever we want; to treat each other however we want. God has called us in our freedom to a life that is structured and ordered around love for God and love for our neighbor. We are set free to live for God and to live for each other.

The story of Exodus invites us to remember, not just that God *liberated*, but that God *liberates*. That God observes our misery, hears our cries, knows our sufferings, and sets us free from all that which holds us captive. And *in* our freedom, we are called to live for God and to live for one another. We are liberated to love and to *use* our freedom to set *others* free, in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.