



We live in a country that is obsessed with freedom. If you listened to the Presidential debates this past week, you heard a lot of references to freedom. We sing songs about freedom. We watch movies about freedom. We talk about freedom of speech, freedom of religion, and freedom of opportunity. We teach our kids about the freedom that our forefathers achieved.

In fact, we have a story in American culture that epitomizes freedom. It is about a group of people a little over 200 years ago who overthrew their oppressors and declared their independence. It is a powerful story that permeates our culture and our national identity. Freedom rings everywhere.

This morning we are continuing with our church-wide series called “EPIC: The astonishing story of God and the world.” We’ve been at this for almost a month now and we’ve covered the whole first book of the Bible. In our first era, “A World Made,” we saw how God created the world with good intentions that ended up being disrupted by bad decisions. In our second era, “A Family Born,” we saw the pieces of God’s plan to bring his creation back to what it was intended to be. We saw how he chose certain men as heroes to carry forth his purposes. And we saw how he plans to overcome evil by redeeming it. God takes evil things and uses them for good purposes.

Today we start our third era, “A People Freed.” This section covers the books of Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. We’ll cover this era in three weeks. This first week we’ll be looking at one of the most well-known stories of the Bible: the story of the Exodus. It’s the story of a man who leads a group of people from bondage into freedom. This story introduces God’s people to the idea of freedom and what it means.

The story of the Exodus covers the first 18 or so chapters of the book of Exodus. It starts off with God’s people in Egypt and ends with them standing before the mountain of God ready to receive the 10 commandments.

We’re going to look at three scenes from this story in an attempt to understand the overall flow of this story. We’ll see what happens at the beginning: the situation that needs to be resolved. We’ll see the proposed solution to

resolve the story. We’ll conclude by seeing how everything turned out.

As we begin this story, I’d like to invite you to pause for a moment and consider your life. I’ve suggested that freedom appeals to us because in some ways we aren’t free. Take a minute and think about one way that you don’t feel free this morning. Maybe it’s a real circumstance: your job or your family situation or your stage in life means you’re not free to do whatever you want to do. Maybe it’s a pattern or habit in your life that you feel trapped by and can’t seem to shake. Maybe it’s a relationship that you feel controlled by or that constrains you in some way. Whatever it might be, take a second and think of one way that you aren’t experiencing freedom.

As we move through this story, keep that in the back of your mind. Come back to it. How does the way God worked then affect your situation now? What could the God you see working in this story do in your life today?

We need to be freed

So to start out, we’re going to look at Exodus 1:7-11. This passage gives us some background information about what life was like in Egypt and what happened to change it.

Exodus 1:7-11:

⁷The Israelites were fruitful and multiplied greatly and became exceedingly numerous, so that the land was filled with them.

⁸Then a new king, who did not know about Joseph, came to power in Egypt. ⁹“Look,” he said to his people, “the Israelites have become much too numerous for us. ¹⁰Come, we must deal shrewdly with them or they will become even more numerous and, if war breaks out, will join our enemies, fight against us and leave the country.”

¹¹So they put slave masters over them to oppress them with forced labor, and they built Pithom and Rameses as store cities for Pharaoh.

Our story begins with life being good. Really good. Verse 7 says that the Israelites were fruitful, they multiplied, and they filled the land. Do those phrases sound familiar to anyone? We've heard them several times before in this EPIC story we've been working through.

This is the same way that God described how life was meant to be when he originally created Adam and Eve. Genesis 1:28 reads, "Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it."

This is what God said to Noah after he and his family and all the animals came out of the ark. Listen to Genesis 9:1, "Then God blessed Noah and his sons, saying to them, "Be fruitful and increase in number and fill the earth."

This is what God promised to Abraham as his solution to restore the earth. Genesis 17:6 says, "I will make you very fruitful; I will make nations of you, and kings will come from you."

This is how Isaac blessed Jacob just before he died. Here's Genesis 28:3, "May God Almighty bless you and make you fruitful and increase your numbers until you become a community of peoples."

So at the beginning of the story, God's people were living in Egypt and they were living the way God intended them to live. They were being fruitful; they were multiplying; they were filling the land. Four hundred years had passed since Joseph brought his entire family to Egypt. God's people had flourished in that time. They had grown from 70 people to around 2 million people. They were doing great.

It's like the movie that opens with an idyllic scene in the woods. Beautiful trees, a running stream in the background, birds singing. And then the sounds start to stop. You know something terrible is going to happen. That's what happens next: "a new king came to power in Egypt." Everything was going well and then a new king came to power.

A lot of us are familiar with this scenario. Challenges are the hardest when they come out of nowhere. Everything is going fine and then all of a sudden you lose your job. Or someone you love gets sick. Or someone says something that you can't shake. And a new king of doubt or worry or addiction or confusion starts to take control.

I think one of the reasons that freedom is such a compelling and reoccurring theme in our culture is that in some way we don't feel completely free. We may live in a free country; we may have opportunities that are

unprecedented in history; we may even have financial resources to do pretty much whatever we want. But I think just about everyone has some way that they feel constrained, limited, or held back. Could it be that freedom is a compelling idea because in some way we don't feel free?

We know about "new kings" that rise up and threaten our freedom. We know about feeling controlled by other forces. We know about wanting to be free. What are some "new kings" that you have faced in your life or in our culture? What forces or patterns or situations threaten life as God intended it to be? What force seems to challenge the role of God in our lives?

Our culture has many kings that come into power and enslave people. The Bible might call them "idols." Ambition. Success. Substances. Approval. The excitement of inappropriate romance. Entertainment. Money. Recreation.

Our first task this morning is to identify with God's people in Egypt. There are so many kings that threaten our freedom. We can feel like we have no choice but to work under their slave masters. This story invites us to find ourselves alongside God's people in Egypt. To realize that they aren't the only ones facing evil kings. We need to realize that we, too, need to be freed.

The problem is that some of us don't realize this or don't want to admit it. As I look around the room, not many of you look like you need to be freed. Some of us have learned to hide our captivity deep within us. Some of us have even learned to hide it from ourselves.

In John 8 Jesus is talking to the successful religious people of his day and tells them this "Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free." Do they respond with excitement and gratitude? No, they say "We are Abraham's descendants and have never been slaves of anyone. How can you say that we shall be set free?" They couldn't see that they needed to be freed.

Are you aware of your need for freedom? Could you answer the question I asked earlier about a way that you don't feel free?

God's people in Egypt thought things were going great until a new king arose and made them captives. But we should ask: were they really free before? They were fruitful and multiplying and filling the land, but maybe they couldn't see something.

They were filling the land, but it wasn't the land they

were supposed to fill. God didn't promise Abraham that he would fill the land of Egypt. He promised him that he would fill the land of promise. Here were God's people living happily in the wrong place. They actually needed to be freed all along, but it wasn't until this new king arose to oppress them that they really realized it.

That's how God works sometimes. There are times when he uses things in our lives—evil things that threaten to enslave us—as tools to help us to see that we need to be freed. God's people didn't see their captivity until they were oppressed by it. I think the same is true for us.

That's why when people sometimes hit rock bottom they end up seeing God the most clearly. Sometimes it is when things fall apart that we recognize our own captivity to sin and death.

In college and for several years afterwards, I felt enslaved to pornography. It was a habit in my life that didn't fit with my convictions, but that I couldn't seem to shake. I felt guilty, powerless, and out of control. It was a new king in my life that oppressed me. Over the course of many years, I found freedom from that king. That particular king is one that oppresses many in our culture. If it's something that you are struggling with, I'd encourage you to talk to me or to one of the pastors or elders. There are lots of resources available to help you.

But one of the ways that God used that struggle in my life was to help me see how much I need to be freed. That helped me to understand that I am an addict, whether I'm addicted to pornography or alcohol or getting an "A" on my report card. That struggle helped me to see how much I need to be freed, not just in that area, but in other areas of my life.

God's people were doing great in Egypt, but it still wasn't what God intended for them. So God used a new king to show them that they needed to be freed. It is a terrible thing to be a slave. It is far worse to be a slave who doesn't know he is a slave. We need to be freed.

God wants to free us

It's a big step to realize that we need to be freed, but that is only the beginning. There must be more to the story. And there is. This new king that has arisen has noticed that the Israelites are numerous. He feels threatened by that. So he starts to do all that he can to put them down.

Right at the beginning, all his efforts to put down God's people fail. He piles them with hard labor, hoping to reduce their numbers. But they increase. Next he tells

the midwives that if a boy is born, they need to drown it right away. But the midwives refuse to do it. God's people increase. Finally, since the midwives didn't cooperate, he commands every Egyptian to murder any Jewish baby boy that they see. What happens? His very own daughter finds a baby boy and raises it. Pharaoh can't even fight God's people within his own house.

So it seems that at every turn, Pharaoh runs up against a wall. He isn't capable of wiping them out, but God's people are still slaves. Now Moses comes into the story. He is an Israelite raised by the daughter of the Pharaoh, but after some trouble, he runs away and is living in Midian. He's tending his flock near the top of a mountain when God starts speaking to him from the midst of a burning bush.

Exodus 3:7-9:

⁷The LORD said, "I have indeed seen the misery of my people in Egypt. I have heard them crying out because of their slave drivers, and I am concerned about their suffering. ⁸So I have come down to rescue them from the hand of the Egyptians and to bring them up out of that land into a good and spacious land, a land flowing with milk and honey—the home of the Canaanites, Hittites, Amorites, Perizzites, Hivites and Jebusites. ⁹And now the cry of the Israelites has reached me, and I have seen the way the Egyptians are oppressing them.

God sees that his people are in trouble. He recognizes their desperate situation. He says, "I have indeed seen the misery of my people in Egypt," "I have heard them crying out," "I am concerned about their suffering," "The cry of the Israelites has reached me," "I have seen the way the Egyptians are oppressing them." Over and over again, God emphasizes that he sees the situation that his people are in. He notices them. He cares about them. His concern has motivated him to act on their behalf.

When you need to be freed from something, this is often the first question you ask. Does anyone see me? Does anyone notice that I need help? Is there anyone out there that sees what is happening to me and is willing to do something about it? The worst part about being trapped in a situation is feeling like no one else knows about it. No one cares. No one is willing to do anything.

The iconic American story of freedom that we've been talking about is about a group of people rising up to free themselves. It is about their effort and their success at creating independence. But notice that the iconic story for God's people is different. They are crying out to someone

else to free them. They are not trying to free themselves. They are expressing their need for God to rescue them.

Babies are born without the capability to take care of themselves. They can't feed themselves or do anything when they have a bowel movement or move around. They are literally trapped, all the time. It must be terrible—I think that's why we don't remember those years. So what do they do? They cry. And cry, and cry, and cry.

And if they are in a good situation, someone notices that cry and responds. They are fed or changed or held or entertained. Babies have no ability to help themselves, so they cry and hope that someone is there to respond.

When a baby cries and no one does anything, that has a really negative impact. I'm not talking about teaching your baby to sleep through the night. I'm talking about a baby that cries and cries and cries and no one comes to help, ever. When that happens, that baby learns that there is no one out there to take care of my needs. No one hears me. No one cares. No one can help. And even though we don't remember those years of our lives, people remember the lessons they learn. It is critical to our development that we know even as babies that if we cry, someone will do something. Someone will respond.

So God's people cry out. And God responds. He notices and he acts.

God tells Moses that he has heard the cry of his people, so he is going to "come down to rescue them." God is going to save the day. He will rescue them and he will bring them out of the land where they don't belong and put them in a land where they do belong.

The first good news of the story is that God wants to save his people. He notices them and he wants to help them. This is what we need to know as well. Once we admit that we need to be freed, we need to know that God wants to free us. We need to know that there is someone else who notices and wants something better for us. God wants to free us.

Sometimes this can be hard to believe. Sometimes our circumstances are so difficult that we think God has left us alone. If we have the courage to admit that we need to be freed, we quickly conclude that there is no one around who can free us. And that leads to despair. This is why many people walk away from God. They have stopped believing that God wants to free them.

But this is one of the consistent messages of the Old Testament. This is a God who notices his people and acts

to save them. The story of the Exodus is the story of a battle between the forces that enslave God's people and the power of God to overcome them. In order to win, God must defeat the enemy. This is how the rest of the story plays out: it is a war between God and Pharaoh. Virtually every scene in the rest of the story depicts a battle between two gods. And in every case, God wins the battle.

God calls Moses to be his general in the war. So Moses leads the war through ten plagues. Each of these is designed to demonstrate to this king that there is a king more powerful. At first, Pharaoh's magicians keep up the pace with God, but not for long. Plague after plague hits and every time, God wins the battle. Every time, it is clear that God is stronger than Pharaoh.

This helps to explain what is often a confusing part of this story. The text repeatedly says that God hardens Pharaoh's heart. When people read that, it sounds like God is dooming Pharaoh to make bad choices. But that isn't what is going on at all. Pharaoh has taken the position of a rival god against the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. They are in a battle to see which one is stronger. God wants to make sure that it is clear that Pharaoh was at his best.

God doesn't want to win and then have Pharaoh blame it on the replacement referees. God doesn't want to win and then have it be said that Pharaoh just gave up. So God actually beefs up his enemy. He makes Pharaoh more like the best version of Pharaoh. He strengthens him so that Pharaoh is on his game. God doesn't want this to be a fair match—he wants to tilt the scales in the balance of his opponent.

It's just like hundreds of years later when Elijah challenges the prophets of Baal to a contest. Let's see whose God can burn up the sacrifice on the altar. So Elijah covers his sacrifice with water. He soaks the wood with water. He digs a trench of water around the altar. And still his God comes out on top. Still the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob is shown to be stronger than the God of Baal.

God wants to free you from your addiction. God wants to free you from difficult circumstances. God wants to free you from the confusion of an unhealthy relationship. God wants to show you that he is stronger than whatever new king has arisen in your life. He wants a clean fight, and he wants to show you that he can win.

God sets us free

We started out by seeing that God's people are in trouble. Then we saw God step in and claim to be able to save them. What happened? Most of you know the story. At every

turn, God proved himself stronger than Pharaoh. This new king may have been able to oppress God's people, but he couldn't beat God himself.

Eventually, the people not only were released from Egypt, but given expensive gifts on their way out. The narrator says they plundered the Egyptians. As Pharaoh watched them leave, he changed his mind and set out after them. So God ended the game by finishing him off. He parted the Red Sea for the Israelites and drowned the Egyptians who tried to follow them.

At the end of this entire ordeal, Moses composes a song to celebrate their victory.

Exodus 15:1-5:

¹Then Moses and the Israelites sang this song to the LORD:

**"I will sing to the LORD,
for he is highly exalted.**

**The horse and its rider
he has hurled into the sea.**

**²The LORD is my strength and my song;
he has become my salvation.**

**He is my God, and I will praise him,
my father's God, and I will exalt him.**

**³The LORD is a warrior;
the LORD is his name.**

**⁴Pharaoh's chariots and his army
he has hurled into the sea.**

**The best of Pharaoh's officers
are drowned in the Red Sea.**

**⁵The deep waters have covered them;
they sank to the depths like a stone.**

God won. A rival god rose up to challenge the ability of the God of Israel, but he was no match. Notice Moses declaring that this is the God of my father. He is the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. He is one who promised to take care of us and now he has.

And notice too that Moses recognizes that this was a battle. "The LORD is a warrior." He was fighting a battle against Pharaoh and he won. He defeated him. He humiliated him. He destroyed him. Pharaoh's army doesn't exist anymore. God made Pharaoh the strongest he could be and God still came out on top. It was never even close. This is the kind of God you want to have on your side.

That's why this story, for the Israelites, became the go-to story for remembering that God can give them freedom. They bring it up whenever they are in trouble. They remind each other that God freed them from Egypt and he can do it again. It comes up in the Psalms, in the prophets, and all over the Old Testament. This is THE STORY of freedom for God's people.

That's why we need this story. We have the American story of freeing ourselves when we need to be inspired. But we can't save ourselves from what we need to be set free from. We need to know there is someone else who can save us. We need to know what he has done in the past to know what he is capable of doing in the future. We know that we need to be freed. We might be convinced that God wants to free us. But finally we need to know that he can. He wants to and he is capable. God sets us free.

Many years later, God's people will face another new king. They will live in their land this time, but they'll be enslaved by the Romans. Caesar will be the new king that threatens their freedom. And so God sends another hero to set them free. But this time, the hero isn't focused on Caesar. This time, God wants to set his people free from a far more ruthless king: the king of sin and death.

The rest of the story in the Old Testament leads up to the point when the Exodus will happen again. When we get to the time of Jesus, it is clear that God's people need to be saved again. They are enslaved and cannot free themselves.

In the gospel of Luke, the first public act of Jesus' ministry was to quote a passage from Isaiah. He stood up in the synagogue and proclaimed, "The Spirit of the Lord has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners."

A lot of Jesus' ministry can be understood in the same way as the battles between Pharaoh and Moses. Jesus is stronger than disease—he heals the sick. Jesus is stronger than the demons—he tells them what to do. Jesus is stronger than death—he brings Lazarus back from the grave. And finally: Jesus' ultimate strength is proven.

He faces off against the enemy, but he has the secret weapon of redemption up his sleeve. Instead of defeating the enemy, he will accept defeat from the enemy. He will succumb to defeat and humiliation. But that defeat turns into victory because Jesus doesn't just defeat death for himself. He makes death powerless. Through Jesus' defeat-turned-into-victory, God's people are freed forever from the power of sin and death.

Those who accept the invitation of God follow Jesus into a new kind of freedom. Not a freedom from some

earthly ruler, but a freedom from everything that holds power in their lives. The true freedom of belonging to the God who created you. Having been freed, you are invited to walk through the waters of baptism just as God's people walked through the Red Sea. You come out the other side a new creation, loved, and free.

If you don't know the freedom that God offers through Jesus Christ, this is a great time to follow him for the first time. You need to be freed. God is stronger than what holds you. Let him set you free. All you have to do is tell God that you accept his invitation. That you want to be freed by Jesus and walk with him in forgiveness of sins.

If you are already a believer in Christ, this story continues to be powerful. We constantly face kings that threaten our freedom. God is constantly taking the freedom he gave us when we believed and applying it to new and deeper places in our lives. A lot of the path of following Jesus is learning to live in the freedom that God has already purchased for us. Don't hide the fact that you still need to be freed. Let God free you.

Conclusion

In fact, this is what we will see as the biblical story continues. God's people are no longer slaves in Egypt, but the task of salvation is not complete.

They are free, but they don't know how to live in freedom. All they know is how to live in bondage. Moses has been their leader to save them from bondage, but there is more to do. They need to know how to live, so God gives them a law. They need a place to live, so God gives them a land. That's what we'll see in the next two chapters of this era.

Throughout this era, God is making a people: a nation. This week, he gave them a leader. Next week, we'll see him give them a law. The following week we'll see God prepare them to live in the land. This is what any nation needs: a leader, a law, and a land.

Earlier this morning I asked you to think about one way that you aren't free today. This story that we have just read tells us about a God who saved his people 3500 years ago. But that same God is here today. The same God who heard the cry of his people in Egypt hears your cry. God sees whatever you are going through. You are not alone.

You are not forgotten.

The same God who challenged the new king that oppressed his people in Egypt steps up to challenge the kings of our world who threaten us today. God is willing to engage them in battle. He is willing for them to take their best shot. He will even give them the advantage. It may even seem like they are winning.

But the same God who beat Pharaoh and set his people free from Egypt will defeat every god of this age and set us free. If you don't know this God, you can accept his invitation today. If you know him already, you can allow him to challenge the gods of your life and set you free in new and different areas.

God sets his people free. May he set us free and may we know that freedom more and more every day of our lives.