

The Greatest Enemy of Freedom is Freedom

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 09 September 2018

Preacher: Dr. Os Guinness

[0 : 00] Thank you.

Thank you.

Thank you. Thank you.

Thank you. Thank you.

Thank you, Tommy. Thank you all. It's a tremendous privilege to be here.

[3 : 11] I'm only sorry to break into Tommy and Laura's first Sunday back. I'm sure you're raring to hear them. And I'm breaking into that and very aware of it.

But you'll have them next Sunday, I imagine. But it's a real privilege for Jenny and me. Before we open the word, let's pray. Lord, open your word to our hearts and our hearts to your word.

We ask in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. I'm sure many of you, if not most of you, have been to the Korean War Memorial.

And the most striking words there are well known. Freedom is not free. Brief, memorable, moving if you think about it.

It obviously speaks to that, what Lincoln called the last full measure of devotion that a citizen can give to his country in giving his life.

[4 : 16] But what America needs to ponder today is not that, although it's still relevant, but the paradox of freedom, which is not so inspiring.

The paradox of freedom is very simply this. The greatest enemy of freedom is freedom. Freedom never lasts.

It never has in any country. Freedom never lasts.

pages of history. And it's ones that Americans need to wrestle with today. But, of course, we know that the greatest textbook and the longest running tutorial on freedom is the biblical understanding. And at a time when America is abandoning the American Revolution, which was decisively biblical in its origins through the Reformation, and going back to ideas that essentially come from the Enlightenment and the French Revolution and its heirs, very different ideas of freedom, many of them insubstantial and many of them dangerous and disastrous.

[5 : 54] We, as followers of Jesus, we, as followers of Jesus, need to be people who think through and stand for deep and realistic views of freedom. And I want to open up just one tiny part of that from Exodus this morning.

The Bible, I think, gives us the highest and most balanced humanism in all history.

In other words, the highest view of humanity, but the most realistic in its balance. So humans are exceptional in their freedom made in the image of God, but they are consequential because they can always act in freedom for either good or for ill, and those choices have consequences.

So let me raise three questions of the passage we read or was read to us. First, very simply, where does freedom come in the story?

Now, one way that's terribly obvious, but another way it's not actually that obvious. Exodus is the story of the freeing of Israel from captivity in Egypt, yes.

[7 : 07] But there's much, much more behind that that goes all the way back to Genesis. And in contrast to all the nations around Israel.

In the ancient world, people were not free. They were ruled by their stars. If we go back to the Greeks, for all their stress on a certain type of freedom in the public square, behind everything was fate, moira, destiny.

And if we read our secularist friends today, for example, most recently, Sam Harris, freedom is a fiction.

The same simple fact is you cannot use naturalistic science, which is the grounding of many of their worldviews, to justify freedom.

We are the greatest champions of freedom, along with our Jewish friends. And it goes back to the Torah. Many Christians say, well, where is freedom apart from the freeing of the slaves?

[8 : 13] Christians love the word, the sovereignty of God. What that means is freedom. God's freedom to exert his will against any interference or resistance.

He is sovereign. He is free. I am who I am. And as the Jews put it, the alternative translation, I will be who I will be. God is supremely free.

God is sovereign. And we men in his image are not sovereign as he is, but we are significant. So yes, we're part of nature. And the laws of nature operate.

And there's a certain cyclical element to human life. We're born, we grow, we decline, we die. But at the same time, with the breath of life, we are the only form of life that has that freedom.

And you can see that coming out. And in Exodus, God is calling for a free people to worship him freely, and so he rescues them from their captivity.

[9 : 18] But let's ask a second question. Or put it another way. The issue in that first one is lordship. Lordship. Again and again in Exodus, I am the Lord.

The Egyptians will know that I am the Lord. You will know that I am the Lord. When? When he frees his people from captivity. Now interestingly, the word serve here, there's one word in Hebrew used for slavery, used for service of the Lord, and used for worship.

It's the same word. Slavery to Pharaoh is the same word for the service and worship of the Lord, but of course, it's a freedom, and as our wonderful Anglican prayer book puts it, whose service is perfect freedom.

But let's raise the second question, because I think we need to explore the way freedom comes in so strongly. But secondly, was God fair?

You heard in the reading, Pharaoh will resist you, and I will harden his heart. And many people are puzzled over that.

[10 : 37] Is Pharaoh just God's plaything? A puppet for him to push aside to free his people, the Israelites, and the great supreme act of favoritism?

And if Pharaoh was not responsible, why is he judged in that way? In other words, behind that is the issue of justice for Pharaoh, but behind that for us is the issue of justice in the universe.

As Abraham says, Shall not the judge of all the earth do right? We want to fight for justice in our world today, in all sorts of fronts, but how can we, if justice is capricious and selective?

And you have here an example of what is really injustice, as God is hardening Pharaoh's heart, and Pharaoh has nothing to do with it. Actually, if you follow the story carefully, you can see the answer to that.

Partly in the mounting challenge of the ten plagues, which we have no time to look at, but you can see that it's not Moses against Pharaoh, it's God against Pharaoh and the gods of Egypt.

[11 : 52] And each of the plague addresses the people of Egypt and Pharaoh behind them, and the gods of Egypt behind them again. But the real answer to the question of God's justice comes in the wording of the ten plagues.

Because if you read it carefully, and many people don't notice it, in the first five plagues, it explicitly says, it is only in the second five plagues, six to ten, that it says the Lord hardened Pharaoh's heart. Now, of course, the question is, what on earth does that mean? And the rabbis and the sages and Christian commentators have puzzled over it.

Some have said it's a form of punishment, God's hardening his heart, for the first five hardenings. Maimonides, the great Jewish rabbi in the 12th century, he said it's a way of God's withholding the possibility of repentance and hardening Pharaoh's heart.

Some have argued that it's actually God's stiffening of Pharaoh's resolve. Because halfway through, even his own courtiers and counselors urge him to let them go.

[13 : 17] In other words, he could give in easily to the groupthink and the pressures around him, and certain rabbis have said, no, God sees his freedom, and that's his resolve, and God is hardening his heart and stiffening his resolve to be what he chooses to be.

But I think the simplest explanation is by far the best and the most profound. The story of the plagues is the story of Pharaoh perverting and corrupting his freedom.

In other words, as you see with evil always, choice leads to habit, habit leads to character, and character eventually becomes compulsion.

In other words, judgment in the scripture is not a drone strike. God's zapping people from the heavens with a lightning bolt or whatever. Sometimes it's that.

More often, it's God's leaving people or driving people to the logic of their own settled choices. So, free people who can choose either good or ill can make choices which become habits, and Tocqueville's famous word, the habits of the heart, we think of as positive, and it is.

[14 : 45] Habits of the heart which are virtue and all those various good things, but the habits of the heart can be negative. And choices made negatively become habits of the heart that are character and eventually compulsion.

So, a third question we might ask of this little passage, who was really free? Now, you might look at the passage, so Moses is the leader of a slave community.

Yes, he was brought up as a prince of Egypt, but he'd spent 40 years on the run, and he's now back as a leader of slaves, and he has to make the requests.

He's the supplicant. Pharaoh stands before him, the most powerful man on the earth in his day, and therefore, with such power, the most free man on the earth in his day.

Any of you been to Cairo or to Egypt as a whole and seen the incredible Giza pyramid and others, it was a statement, a sermon almost in stone.

[15 : 57] The widest part at the bottom, the people. And slowly, you come up to the apex, and at the very top, one stone, one man, Pharaoh, the incarnate representation of the sun god.

He was the most powerful. He was the most free. But you see, as the story goes on, halfway through, as I said, his courteous come to him, let the people go.

Don't you realize, they say to Pharaoh, Egypt is ruined. But still, he hardens his heart and refuses to let them go.

Now, you can see behind that and behind the biblical understanding of freedom and power, the various things we need to learn about both power and freedom. Power is essential to freedom. But in our world, which is a postmodern world and there's no truth, freedom is only power. And we need to learn the lessons of the Bible.

[17 : 04] And you remember, the most famous statement on this was by a Christian in the 19th century, Lord Acton, all power tends to corrupt. Absolute power corrupts absolutely.

In other words, power does three things. Most obviously, power oppresses the weak. And we need to address truth to power as the prophets did.

Less obviously, power corrupts the powerful. But also, power creates anxiety because the powerful are worried that their power may slip away and a rival may take it.

And power needs to be well watched carefully. Think of what's called the suicidities trap. When a ruling power is challenged by a rising power, say America and China, you have the most serious challenges coming.

But the biblical view of power is profoundly realistic. But not just power. Freedom. As the rabbis, the sages, the Christian commentators have said, freedom in a negative form when it becomes evil has always two faces.

[18 : 17] One face is outward, what evil does to the victim. But the other face is inward, what evil does to the perpetrator.

He or she gets away with it, but actually, through the choices that become negative habits of heart, that become character, they are slowly trapped by their choices and eventually becomes compulsion.

obsession. And you can see that ideas that are compelled become obsessions. And behavior that is compelled becomes addictions.

And so, by the end of the story, you see that Pharaoh, the most powerful free man in the world, is actually on a course for self-destruction because he hardened his heart.

God leads him and drives him to the logic of his choice of a hardened heart and it proves in the end of the day self-destructive. Again, as the sages say, who is really mighty?

[19 : 27] Not the one who conquers his enemies, but the one who can conquer himself. himself. One last question.

What are the lessons that we can learn from this passage and wider still from Exodus as a whole? With a short time, I'll just mention them all rather briefly. First, liberty is God's goal for humanity.

Put it in New Testament terms. It was for freedom Christ set us free. For the words of our Lord, you will know the truth and the truth will set you free.

As Paul says in chapter 5 of Galatians, you were called to freedom. Sadly, at a time when freedom is in crisis today, Christians are not known for being the greatest champions and guardians of freedom.

And we need to think this through and live it out and speak it out and show a way to a more robust and nuanced realistic freedom that truly points the way forward for genuine human shalom and flourishing.

[20 : 45] Second obvious question from lesson from Exodus. Liberty is always more than liberation. Liberation is only the negative.

Freed from Egypt. Liberty must be a way of life that goes on from generation to generation. Or again, as the rabbis put it, it took the Lord one day to get Israel out of Egypt.

But it took them more than 40 years and counting to get Egypt out of Israel. They were free, but they still weren't really free.

And I think that's part of our lesson again today in the church. Take, say, the born again movement. It puts such an emphasis on born again, testimonies, what the Lord has saved us from, and not on discipleship, and living lives of freedom and communities of freedom.

And we need to see that it's that second, the first, of course, essential. It has to be there. But the second, the one that really needs to go on. Much American freedom today is a libertarian freedom, which will just dig its own grave and already is, and very different from the founder's freedom, and certainly from the Reformation freedom, and behind that, from the biblical freedom.

[22 : 12] Thirdly, what you see in Exodus, liberty is not either or. It's always more or less. In other words, it's not you're free or not free.

But rather, are we growing in freedom? Are we exercising freedom? Think of the 10,000 hours principle, say, of piano playing or ballet dancing. The same is true of freedom.

It's not just a matter of freeing people from whatever it is, but of their exercising freedom and making freedom a genuine habit of the heart and a growth in character and so on.

And we need to stress that in our world today, which has got a very lopsided view of freedom. But surely, this particular passage points to a fourth simple lesson.

The freest people become slaves when they rule everyone except themselves. I'm a visitor to your country.

[23 : 13] It's a strikingly obvious thing. You call yourselves the land of the free. No country in the world has a greater amount of addictions, recovery groups, and so on today.

Americans are far from free. And you can see that the unrealism of modern American freedom is a long way from the early American, let alone the Reformation and the biblical.

We need to put our stress on the habits of the heart and really think it through carefully. One last lesson, though, from Exodus and in this passage, too. According to Exodus, where is God to be found?

I love apologetics. I don't understand what I'm about to say. But if you say, where is God to be found and how can I get to know God today, most Christians will immediately give you something along the lines of the theistic proofs or a powerful case for the proof of the resurrection.

That isn't actually the biblical way. In other words, our Western church is much more Greek than we realize. The Greeks did think of philosophy, logic, how you can tell things from the course of nature.

[24 : 36] But while the Greeks talked of philosophy, the Bible talks of history. History. And you can see it very clearly here.

You shall know that I am the Lord when I bring you out of Egypt. You can think of the Ten Commandments. As the Jews point out, what's the introduction to the Ten Commandments?

You might have expected, I am the Lord your God who created heaven and earth, therefore, 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10. What you actually have is, I am the Lord your God who brought you out of Egypt, and therefore, etc.

in other words, where is God? God, biblically? The key is history more than philosophy and theory by itself.

Not that we reject the other, but we know where God is profoundly to be seen, and we need to see God today in history, acting in our lives in powerful ways.

[25 : 45] So I'd urge you as Americans and Christian Americans here, very easy to consider freedom over against tyranny. We are free compared with George III, Hitler, Stalin, Pol Pot, you name them.

And certainly, the scriptures have a lot of warnings for tyrants, the complacency of power, triumphalism, hubris, and the way God brings down the arrogant.

But surely, the challenge for us in a very free society is to wrestle with the subtleties and the paradoxes of freedom. You know the old saying, the worst is often the corruption of the best. Our German friends have to wrestle with the awful fact that their country was the most educated, the best in civilization and culture.

And it was out of that that came Hitler and Himmler and Heydrich. So we can't just say this is the land of the free.

[27 : 03] Freedom never lasts. And the Bible gives us all the warnings of this. Now I don't want to end in a negative note. To me, one of the great things I think in addressing the present moment is the biblical notion that the end is not the end.

I'll put it differently. In the Bible, there are two ends. There is an end as an ending and a conclusion. The Latin word finis, ending.

And there is an end as the Greek word telos, the end, the purpose, the goal, the climax, the culmination. So you take our great brother St. Augustine.

While many Christians were lamenting the collapse of Rome, his vision of the city of God within the city of man looked to God's end even in the ending of Rome.

And his vision gave the church strength to go through what became the dark ages. I'm not saying this is the ending. Certainly we're seeing the decline of the West and America suffering its gravest crisis since the Civil War.

[28 : 21] But whatever endings you see in that sense of finis, we know as followers of Jesus there is always an end, a goal, a purpose, a climax, a culmination and God is working those purposes out even through the other type of ending.

So this is no time to be dispirited or downhearted or demoralized but rather to explore the full richness of what it means to follow Jesus. and understand the freedom that he gives us.

The dignity of humanity that he shows us. What justice means, what peace means, what equality means and in a world dying for the lack of these deep things to go out and to be the people, be the community which demonstrates those to our world and shows the glory of the gospel.

We of all people should be the champions and the guardians of freedom at this extraordinary moment. The Lord be with you.

This is a midst Quest and a friend and unattended to be the reason and on not the extent of the gold to be the wicked and the power of Shoxia and the council of orious to be the and peace to be the and the inscription of pex America has already mentioned that and