

Jesus, the Exodus, and the Path to Freedom

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[0 : 00] I remember when I was 27 years old, wow, sitting at my desk in my bedroom in Chicago, Illinois, in an apartment I shared with two other guys, and I remember having one of those moments of realization, a moment of clarity so stark, I can still remember the angle of my chair I was sitting in and the wall that I was looking at.

The realization in that moment was that life suddenly felt very hard, and things were not going the way that I had expected them to, and I felt powerless to do anything about it.

And although this sort of realization had been building for some time, the moment came kind of like a shock because it had come on the back of several years leading up to this point in which I had experienced my life as one kind of blessing and gift after another.

So after graduating from college, I went to seminary in Chicago, and that began a season of life that was incredibly rich. Prayers that I had been praying for for years were suddenly answered.

I joined this incredible church and became part of this rich community. My spiritual life was absolutely transformed, and there was this sense of God's presence like nothing I had ever experienced before.

[1 : 43] This continued after seminary. After seminary, I had moved to England to become an assistant pastor for the next two years, and the sense of community and God's blessing and nearness only seemed to expand during that time.

It was kind of like this four-year honeymoon of gifts and blessing and ministry and friendship. After seminary, two years in England, I moved back to Chicago to take on a new role, and at this point, I assumed that what I had been experiencing was the new normal.

But just as I moved back, many of the friends who had been so central to my life started moving away. I had begun dating a girl after moving back, but while many of my friends' relationships were beginning to lead towards marriage, mine was not.

The church, which had been so central to my own transformation, was now filled with all of these new faces, and it just seemed to lack the community and energy that I had experienced before. And in my own walk with God, God seemed distant, and my attempts at prayer felt dry and lifeless. And it was this sudden realization, sitting in my chair that day in Chicago, that the things I believed to be true about my spiritual journey, that what I had experienced in one season was just going to continue into the next, that this was not, in fact, the case.

[3 : 18] And what especially hit me was not simply that things were not going the way I wanted them to, but that I felt powerless to do anything about it.

There was no snapping of my fingers to bring my friends back, or for my dating life to flourish, or for my church community to meet my needs in the way that it once had, or for God to provide on demand the experiential closeness that I had felt before.

In our gospel reading this morning from Matthew chapter 16, I think that we observe perhaps a similar kind of moment of realization among Jesus' disciples.

Up until this point, the passage that we just heard, in the first 15 and a half chapters, Matthew's gospel has been filled with story after story of Jesus powerfully intervening in people's lives. He's healing lepers. He's casting out demons. He's making the lame walk. He is telling stories that upend people's expectations.

[4 : 41] And he's preaching sermons, like the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5 through 7, in which he takes things that people thought they knew, like the laws of Moses, and he then interprets them in radical and revolutionary ways.

People's lives are being transformed. In chapter after chapter, people are having these staggering experiences of liberation and freedom and blessing.

But then, in Matthew 16, beginning in verse 21, something changes. Moments earlier, Peter has just confessed that Jesus is the Messiah.

And it's a kind of high point and climax up until that point. What had been wondered about and whispered about has now been confessed. It's in the open. But no sooner has Peter said this, Jesus, you're the Messiah.

No sooner does he say this, and Jesus pivots. Matthew says this, from that time on, Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes and be killed, and on the third day be raised.

[6 : 08] And Peter reacts to this new information in the way that most of us react when we sense that change is coming. Peter tries to argue with Jesus about it.

And in verse 22, it says that Peter took Jesus aside and began to rebuke him and say, this is not going to happen to you. Remember, Peter is a card-carrying freedom fighter.

He's a zealot. And he assumes that at some point, Jesus is going to lead all of them in a violent uprising against Rome. And so Peter has some deeply embedded assumptions about what life with Jesus is going to look like.

But Jesus tells Peter, not only are you wrong about what's going to happen to me, because I am, in fact, going up to Jerusalem not to kill but to be killed, but if you are going to continue following me, you also are going to need to be prepared for this to be your reality too.

Jesus says to everyone standing there, if anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it.

[7 : 28] But whoever loses his life for my sake will find it. And here, I think, we just have to pause for a moment because we find ourselves confronted by one of the deepest mysteries and paradoxes at the heart of the gospel and I would say even at the heart of the universe.

We really do not start to live until we start to lay down our lives. We find our life by losing it.

This is hard to grasp and not only because it goes against our deep instincts for self-preservation and self-advancement. It's also difficult to grasp because just as it was with Peter and the disciples, in the earliest stages of our journey with Jesus, at the earliest stages, we are usually not able to hear this more difficult teaching.

Notice that in the gospels, Jesus calls people to follow him and then they observe or experience for themselves one moment after another of freedom and blessing and deliverance.

The blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the deaf hear, outsiders become insiders, the last become first. People begin to taste and experience the reality of God's kingdom breaking into their lives and into the world.

[9 : 15] And that's how their journey with Jesus begins. And just as it was for the disciples in the crowds in Jesus' day, it is easy to assume that the way that God works in the earliest stages of our life with him is the way that he's going to work in the later stages of our life with him.

And therefore, along with Peter, we are sometimes surprised and sometimes put off when we are confronted by a deeper work that God wants to do in us, which requires embarking on a more difficult stage of the journey.

we heard the Old Testament reading this morning from Exodus 14 in which the people of Israel miraculously escape Egypt.

The Exodus is an important story to keep in mind when we're reading the Gospels because in many ways the Gospels narrate the way in which Jesus' life and ministry is inaugurating a new Exodus story.

Think about it. After Jesus is born, he's at risk of being killed by Herod and so to escape Herod, Mary and Joseph flee to where?

[10 : 52] Egypt. It's only later after it is safe that Joseph and Mary leave Egypt with Jesus to return to Galilee.

And the fact that this happens is not just some sort of incidental detail the Gospel writers decide to include. Rather, it is to show that Jesus himself will leave Egypt and from there will enter into the promised land of Israel just like Moses and the Israelites did.

Jesus embodies Israel and his life is a reenactment of Israel's journey from Egypt to the promised land. And just as Moses led Israel out of bondage and slavery to Pharaoh, so Jesus will lead people out of bondage to sickness or demonic oppression or ultimately out of bondage to sin.

But as we remember from our psalm this morning, Psalm 78, Israel's exodus was not completed simply by crossing the Red Sea.

They didn't go straight into the promised land. There was a deeper freedom that could only happen by spending 40 years in the desert.

[12:20] one writer put it, it may have taken 40 days to get Israel out of Egypt, but it took 40 years to get Egypt out of Israel.

But of course, Israel didn't understand this. They were shocked by this prospect of wandering in the desert, having observed the powerful way that God had worked on their behalf at the start of their journey, the 10 plagues visiting the Egyptians and then miraculously walking on dry ground across the Red Sea.

They thought this was the new normal. They didn't understand that leaving Egypt was just the beginning. In today's gospel reading, it's clear that Peter and the disciples did not realize that they were just beginning their journey with Jesus.

They have observed the works of deliverance by Jesus thus far, and they assumed this is the new normal. And so when Jesus begins talking about suffering and carrying a cross, they are perhaps understandably confused.

They don't understand that deeper journey that Jesus wants to take his disciples on. Many of us here will be able to look back on our lives and be able to identify an exodus moment or an exodus season.

[14:02] There was a point at which we experienced God's goodness, God's mercy, where he reached into our lives and rescued us.

Sometimes maybe just rescuing us from ourselves. In some cases it may have been sudden and dramatic. In other cases it may have been outwardly undramatic and took place over a longer stretch of time.

But those moments become part of our story. And just as Israel would from that day forward always recount the exodus story, the way that God had dramatically rescued them, we too tell of those moments in our story in which God rescued us and graciously intervened in our lives.

But the long road to ultimate freedom and deeper transformation is not for the most part marked by a series of endless dramatic interventions by God on our behalf.

God does do that. Thank God. God does not want us to remain children. The path to Christian maturity means that just as Jesus begins to speak to his disciples in a different way, and I would say even a more collaborative way, as he does here in Matthew 16, at some point Jesus will also begin to speak to us more seriously and collaboratively about what following him looks like.

[15:52] He will begin to reveal to us more specifically in the unique circumstances of our own lives what it means to carry our cross and follow him. It's worth pausing briefly to ask what Jesus means by this, to carry our cross.

Some commentators suggest that burying one's cross simply means to patiently endure the various trials of everyday life. On the other hand, some scholars argue that taking up one's cross means nonviolent resistance to the political order or to different forms of social oppression, and I think it's possible for both of these ways to be part of what it means to take up our cross.

But along with most commentators, I think that taking up one's cross is a way of speaking about simply the call to deny ourselves when we are tempted to hold on to something that competes with deeper devotion to Christ.

And to help us do that, to help us learn to get over ourselves and to wean us off those temporal things that keep us from a more radical freedom, the Lord may lead us into some deserts.

The Lord may have rescued us dramatically in the past, he may have taken us out of Egypt, but he's going to spend the rest of our lives getting Egypt out of us. And that's harder and takes longer.

[17:31] And therefore one of the questions that we might occasionally ask in our own lives with God is, in what areas of my life am I still bound to Egypt?

In what areas of my life am I not truly free? Where might I be bound by anger or resentment? Where might I still be trapped by my desires? Where does a longing for admiration still drive my choices?

Where does the allure of safety and predictability keep me from responding to that inner nudge to live more radically? Here's something we need to remember.

