

Through the Waters

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[0 : 0 0] Again, welcome to the Easter Vigil. We're going to take a few minutes now to pull together some of the themes! that we have been circling around all night.

Some of the themes around new life and baptism and transformation and death and life and everything in between. You know, spirituality is a very relevant topic these days.

Most people I talk to, I don't know what your experience is, but most people I talk to would absolutely consider themselves to be spiritual people. People are spiritually open these days. They're spiritually hungry. People are curious. And I think there's a longing out there for some connection to something bigger than ourselves.

And I find that people are open to things like prayer. I find that people are open to and many times practice things like meditation. People long for something that will pull them out or give meaning to life.

[0 : 5 9] And so because of that, I think it's very common for people to think of Christianity through this lens. The Christianity or Christian practices or Christian spirituality, that's just one type of spirituality that one can add to one's life.

Or you can maybe take certain practices from Christianity and add them to enrich your life. It's essentially a way to become a slightly better version of yourself.

Or at least a more well-rounded version. But this story that we heard a little while ago, the story of the crossing of the Red Sea, directly confronts that way of thinking.

Because if you understand the meaning of that story, God's people passing through the Red Sea and being liberated, you'll recognize it's not a story about adding something to your life.

It's a story about people being rescued from a hopeless situation. And that's a very different way of thinking. And this story, the story of the Exodus, is in the eyes of the Bible, it is the paradigm for how we understand Christian salvation.

[2 : 1 1] This story from Exodus chapter 14 is the paradigm. In fact, in 1 Corinthians chapter 10, the Apostle Paul connects the crossing of the Red Sea to Christian baptism.

He refers to the Israelites and he says, they passed through the sea and were baptized. So if we want to understand Christian salvation, we need to understand this story.

If we want to understand what makes Christianity unique, we need to understand this story. If we want to understand why Christianity stands alone among all the religions and philosophies of the world, we have to understand this story.

So that's what we're going to look at in brief. And we want to ask a couple of questions. Why do people need to be rescued? Why do we need to be rescued?

That's the first question. And then how does God rescue people? That's the second question. So let's pray. And then we'll open God's word together. Lord, you are undoubtedly here.

[3 : 1 2] We're aware, keenly aware, some of us, of your presence. And now, Lord, we ask for your voice. Lord, not my voice, not our voices, not human voices of wisdom or thoughtfulness or advice.

Lord, we need your voice in our hearts and our minds. You know what we need to hear. Lord, open our hearts to you and speak. And we pray this in your son's holy name. Amen.

So why do we need to be rescued? To give you a little background on this story, Israel had been, as a nation, born into slavery for generations.

They had only ever always known slavery. And then God raised up Moses, and God told Moses that he was going to lead God's people to freedom.

And so he raises Moses up, and then through Moses, he sends 10 devastating plagues on Egypt, clearly demonstrating his superiority over Pharaoh.

[4 : 11] Pharaoh is no true adversary to God. Pharaoh is no divine being. Pharaoh is nothing. Not only can God defeat Pharaoh, God can control Pharaoh's heart.

There's no contest between God and Pharaoh. He demonstrates this. And then finally, after the 10th plague, Pharaoh says, Enough! We have to get rid of these people. And he lets the Israelites go, and now they're on this long journey back to their ancestral homeland. And they travel miles and miles. And then along the way, the Egyptians change their mind. And they say, What have we done? We've lost all of our help. We've lost all of the people who did all the hard labor. What have we done? Our economy is going to crash. And so Pharaoh changes his mind, and he summons all of the chariots, the most terrifying, devastating instruments of war and death in the known world at that time.

These are weapons of mass destruction in this time and place. And he pulls all the chariots and his whole army together, and they all pursue the Israelites who are on the run.

[5 : 21] And their intention is to slaughter them. Their intention is genocide. The essential message to the Israelites is, If you're not going to serve us, if you're not going to obey us, if you're not willing to be our slaves, then you're going to die.

And so the Israelites find themselves trapped between the army on one side and the sea on the other. There's death in either direction. There's no escape. So up to now, this is a story.

And so you might be wondering, What does this have to do with us? What does this have to do with me, living in D.C. in the 21st century? And what we need to understand about the story of Israel is the way the Bible offers us this story is the Bible actually says, This isn't just an old story to learn lessons from.

The story of Israel is the story of us. The story of Israel is the story of the whole world. And we, friends, have actually, just like Israel, been born into slavery.

We've been born into bondage, to sin and death. Now I know as I say that, most people in the modern world would disagree with that. Most people would not like the idea.

[6 : 32] They would say, Yes, we know that modern slavery exists, and that's a scourge on the earth. But most of us have been born free. We've always been free. The idea of being born into slavery is a very foreign and unpleasant idea.

But we need to look at what Jesus says. In John chapter 8, He's talking to some Jews, and He says, If you abide in My Word, you're truly My disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.

And when He says free, some people get really angry. And they say, What are you talking about? Free. They're offended. They say, How dare you suggest that we need to be set free?

We are free. We've never been slaves to anyone. And of course, Jesus says, Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who practices sin is a slave to sin.

What's He saying? If you look at your life, and you don't live the kind of life you want to live, if there's a disconnect between the kind of person you think you are and the kind of person you actually are, you're a slave.

[7 : 39] You're a slave to sin. He's saying sin, all the ways we miss the mark, all the ways we fall short, all the ways we go wrong, all the ways we live in God's world as though there is no God.

He says that's all indicative of the fact that we are slaves. Sin is a symptom of our slavery. And what does it mean to be a slave?

Maybe the simplest definition is this. Being a slave means you're not allowed to say no. Right? A slave can't say no. If your master tells you to do something, you can't say no.

That's what it means to be a slave. Somebody else is calling the shots in your life. So if you can't stop overeating, you're a slave to food.

If you can't stop drinking too much, you're a slave to alcohol. If you can't stop losing your temper, then you're a slave to anger.

[8 : 39] If you're simply unable to forgive somebody, you're a slave to resentment. Now, some of these are obvious, but some of our masters are not so obvious or easy to recognize.

If you can't stop worrying about bad things happening to your spouse or to your kids, you're a slave to fear. If you can't stop conforming to what other people expect of you, then you're a slave to the approval of other people.

If you can't stop working long enough to spend some meaningful time with your kids or your spouse on a regular basis, then you're a slave to your career. If you can't stop hating the other political party

or people who disagree with you politically, you're a slave to politics.

If you can't stop scrolling on your smartphone, you're a slave to dopamine, right? We're all slaves to something. We're all slaves to something.

I'm not scrolling right now, by the way. I had a bit of a malfunction, and we're working with it. But we're all slaves to something, friends. And this is a hard pill to swallow.

[9 : 58] But you know, this isn't new information. This isn't a 21st century sort of discovery of how human beings work. We've always kind of known this, even though we wanted to pretend it wasn't true.

You know, the ancient poets knew it. Euripides, brilliant Athenian playwright, lived in the 400s BC. Brilliant poet.

He says this, no one is truly free. They're a slave to wealth, fortune, the law, or other people restraining them from acting according to their will.

Euripides knew it thousands of years ago. You know, poets are wonderful because they're willing to say things that most other people aren't willing to say.

Our modern poets know it as well. David Foster Wallace, he says in the day-to-day trenches of life, there's actually no such thing as atheism. There's no such thing as not worshipping.

[10 : 54] Everybody worships. The only choice we get is what to worship. Right? He's saying there is something that is ultimate in all of our lives, whether we want to admit it or not.

There's something that we live for, something that we serve. Or how about one of the most famous poets of our age, Bob Dylan. You may be an ambassador to England or France.

Some of you may be, actually. You may like to gamble. You may like to dance. You may be the heavyweight champion of the world. You may be a socialite with a long strand of pearls, but you're going to have to serve somebody.

Yes, indeed. You're going to have to serve somebody. Well, it may be the devil or it may be the Lord, but you're going to have to serve somebody. Jesus is saying, you're going to have to serve somebody.

And it's either the devil or it's the Lord. Because you need to understand that these masters, when we talk about fear, anxiety, resentment, anger, we're not just talking about psychology.

[11 : 58] We're not just talking about behavior modification. These things have spiritual power behind them. They have spiritual power. And if we are serving them, if they're our masters, we are in spiritual bondage to them.

And they're all tools in the hand of the enemy. So the question is, how does God rescue his people? How does God rescue us? See, on their own in this story, the Israelites have no chance of escape.

And that's a very important part of the story. They have no possibility of escape. Their former masters say, service or die. And they're caught between the army and the sea.

And on this side of the sea is slavery on death. On that side of the sea is freedom and life. But how to get from one side to the other? How do you cross over? And the people began to lose their minds, and they began to idealize life back in Egypt.

Is it because there were no graves in Egypt that you brought us out here to die? I love the irony, the dark irony in the Bible. It's really wonderful. And the sarcasm is very rich sometimes in the Bible.

And that's a great example of biblical sarcasm.

[13 : 11] Is it because there were no graves in Egypt? Were all the graves taken so you brought us out here where there's plenty of room to bury us? That's what they're saying. And then they say something that's purely delusional. They say, we told you we didn't want to come.

We told you we were happy there. You know, that's not true. But have you ever been in an abusive relationship? And then you got out of it? And then a few months go by, and you're lonely, and things get hard, and you start thinking back to that abusive relationship.

And you think, you know, it wasn't so bad. Maybe I should give it another try. And some people go back again and again and again. They say, we never really, we didn't say we wanted to leave.

You're being kind of ridiculous, Moses. They have no hope of escape. Their only hope is for God to intervene. And so through Moses, God says, do not be afraid.

And then Moses says, stand firm, and you'll see the deliverance the Lord will bring you today. The Lord will fight for you. Listen, friends, and you need only to be still. There's no other religion that says that.

[14 : 13] Other religions say, you're going to fight for me. God says to the people, you're going to fight for me. You're going to go out and conquer lands and bring me glory. But our God says, I will fight for you, and you have only to be still.

And so God intervenes. And Moses raises his hand. And I want you to see this because it's easy to miss this.

Before anything happens, God says to his people, yeah, I've heard you crying. Why do you keep crying? And he essentially says, the time for crying is over.

I want you to stand up, and I want you to start walking. But you need to understand, nothing has happened to the water yet. And that's a very important little detail that you can miss. He says, I want you to start walking.

And they're looking at the army bearing down on them and turning around, and there's the water lapping. And he says, yeah, start walking. And, you know, and they're kind of like, okay. And then they have to start walking.

[15 : 18] And you can imagine their feet starting to get wet as they're slowly starting to walk into the water, into what they think might be a very watery demise. And then God says to Moses, I want you to raise your hand up.

And then the wind begins to blow, and then the water begins to part as their feet are already wet. And then, once they begin to move in faith, the waters begin to part.

And then the God's people pass through the water, and they make it safely to the other side. But, of course, when the Egyptian army tries to follow, it is confusion, it's mass hysteria, and ultimately, the same water that saved the Israelites brings God's judgment on the Egyptians.

The same water that liberates God's people brings utter destruction to God's enemies, and they're utterly destroyed.

So God frees His people from the sentence of death, right? Because on this side of the water, they stood condemned. If you want service, you're going to die. But God frees them from the sentence of death.

[16 : 21] He brings judgment on their former masters. And as they emerge on the other side of the water, they're no longer under condemnation. The death sentence is gone, and their masters are no more.

They've been completely and utterly defeated. And so they emerge on the other side of the water as free people who have been given new life. And you say, well, this is a great story, but what does this have to do with Christian salvation?

Well, don't you understand the connection? Don't you see what's happening? Just as Moses passed through the Red Sea and came out on the other side alive and well, on that first Easter, Jesus Christ passed through death itself and came out on the other side alive and well.

Don't you see that Jesus passed through the Red Sea of death itself, the ultimate Red Sea, and emerged with new life? So this weekend, friends, this is what we remember.

On the cross, Jesus died, and then he was laid in a tomb on Holy Saturday, as we've come to call it. But on the third day, bells ready, he rose again. He rose again.

[17 : 34] And what Scripture says is that for those who are willing to follow Jesus through that sea, for those who are willing to follow Jesus through that death, that death becomes a doorway into new life.

And that, friends, is the entire meaning of Christian baptism. That's why baptism is so important. Because when you are baptized, you pass through the waters.

You follow Jesus through death into new life. That's what the Apostle Paul says in Romans chapter 6. Don't you know that all of us who were baptized into Jesus Christ were baptized into his death? You went into the water with him. We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death, in order that just as Christ was raised from the dead, through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life.

And the entire Christian life, friends, is about living out of that new identity. And here's the wonderful, joyful detail that we can't miss.

[18 : 44] Can you imagine what it was like to be those Israelites passing through the sea? I imagine some of them walked through boldly. They said, I have faith. I believe.

And they see the water on the left and the right. And they're passing through. And they're saying, I trust the Lord. And they're striding confidently forward. But I guarantee it wasn't everybody. I

guarantee you there were people who crossed that ocean very differently.

You know, I guarantee you there were people that were kind of more like, you know. And they're thinking as they're with every step, they're like, I'm going to die. I'm going to die. I'm going to die. And any minute they're waiting for the water to give way and to come in because this is impossible, right? But guess what? They all made it through. They all made it through. What does that tell you? What does that tell you? It is not the quality of your faith. It is not the strength of your faith.

[19 : 43] It is not the consistency of your faith. It's not the quantity of your faith. It is the object of your faith that saves you. It is the object of your faith that saves you.

will you cross through the water or not? It doesn't matter how you do it. Do you trust the guy leading the way? Do you trust him to get you through? So unlike our modern assumptions about spirituality, Christianity is not just something that we add to our life. Jesus is not offering coping strategies for dealing with slavery and death to make it slightly more bearable. He's offering a way out. God sets us free from slavery and death through a decisive act. And so the question that I want you to reflect on tonight, tomorrow morning, for the next few days, for the next few weeks, what side of the water are you on?

What side of the water are you on? If you haven't passed through the water, then spiritual bondage and death remain. And there is no amount of therapy. There is no amount of self-help. There are no amount of epiphanies will ever change that fact. And unless you put your faith in Jesus, there is no amount of effort or willpower that will ever change the fact that we live under the yoke of slavery and death.

But when we come to Jesus and repent and put our faith in him and we pass through the water of baptism, our old self dies and we receive a new identity in Christ, a decisive act.

If you have passed through the water, then I encourage you, let us live out of that new identity and freedom.

[21 : 43] See, even after they were set free, Israel struggled with the temptation to go back into slavery because it was familiar. Again and again in the wilderness, they would say, remember the good old days in Egypt when we had just piles of meat and piles of fruit and they're delusional.

It's so tempting to go back to what we know, to what seems familiar, to fall back into our old patterns. And so they had to learn how to live as free people. And so what did God do? He gave them a community and he gave them the law to show them what a free society looks like. And he nourished them in the wilderness with manna. And in the same way, friends, those of us who pass through the water are going to continue to struggle with the temptation to go back to our old masters. I remember a story that Nick Kristof told about he and his wife work with modern slavery and they work trying to set free people from various, set people free from various forms of slavery. And he tells this heartbreaking story of this young woman that they had freed from slavery. She had been trafficked. And for years, she had been trafficked. And they free her and they bring her back to her village. And there's a great celebration. And everybody is celebrating her return. And then everybody goes to bed. And in the morning, they wake up and she's gone. And they realize that in the early hours of the morning, she had gotten up and she had gone back to her masters. This is all she knew. She had become addicted to drugs, which is one of the ways that she had been enslaved. And she was so dependent that she didn't know any other way to live. And some of us may feel that way. You say, I'm a Christian. I passed through the water, but I don't feel that. And this, friends, is why we can't do it alone. This is why we need the power of the Holy Spirit. Our church should be praying and crying out to God every single day for more of the Holy Spirit. It's the only way we will ever be free. It's the only way we'll ever have anything to offer people who want to be free. This is, friends, why we need the support of a church community. If you're not a part of a church, you should be a part of our church. If you are a part of a church, you should go and be fully a part of that church. And this is why we need the ongoing nourishment of God's Word and the bread and the wine of the Eucharist. We need to learn how to live as free people, as free people.