

The Liberating God

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Preacher: Rev. Ben Roberts

[0 : 00] Well, good morning. As Aaron said, you've got the B team this morning, but we're doing our best. It's great to be here.

My name is Ben Roberts, in case I haven't met you yet. I'm the guy that does the things with the Artidzo people, our interns, our training program here. And we're continuing this morning in our series with Life Explored that the Bible studies are going through, which is a series that is exploring the different facets of God's character.

And this morning, the piece of his character that we're looking at is God as the liberating God, the God who gives freedom. Well, every year, think tanks full of very smart people release reports that rank freedom around the world.

Perhaps you've seen one of these. These reports compare different countries, and they stack them up based on things like civil liberties, human rights, opportunity, things like that. Last year, Canada ranked eighth for economic freedom.

Congratulations. And it highlights some of the things that are great about Canada. But I wonder, if we did manage to jump that seven places, and we made it to number one, the most economically free country in the world, would we feel more free?

[1 : 24] Would we be more free? We all know that you can be financially independent, and yet remain a slave to money. And we've seen in our own lives and the lives of others that you can have all the choice in the world, and it can still be death to you if it's your master.

But when we turn to the Bible, we find a different gauge, a different set of metrics for measuring human freedom. And it doesn't measure choice, you know, our ability to choose things, but instead it diagnoses our allegiance.

So it's not about if you serve, but it's about who you serve. And so to understand how becoming a slave to the liberating God gives us freedom, we'll start with a story about slavery from Exodus.

So we'll look at that Exodus reading, chapter 3. Then we'll see how God takes those slaves and starts to move them into freedom. And then we'll jump over to Matthew, and we'll see what Jesus has to say about it, and about his yoke of service that somehow gives us freedom.

So let's turn to page 46. If you're a few Bibles there, Exodus 3. Here's the situation that we find in Exodus 3. So humans have rebelled against God, their good creator.

[2 : 44] So remember, we talked about this a couple weeks ago, about the reality of sin in our world. We've rebelled against God, and it's made our hearts desperately sick. It's made our world incredibly broken.

But God, in Genesis, embarks on a plan to set things right. And so the first thing he does is he calls this family from Iraq, and he promises that he's going to somehow use them in his plan.

He brings them all the way over to what we know is Israel, and Israel today. This family was there for a while, and then they had to go down to Egypt because of a famine. And so this family settles down, and they start to grow.

They grow into a people called Israel. And Egypt, for that family, was a sanctuary. But over time, what began as a sanctuary became a death camp. Pharaoh, the Egyptian king, had enslaved Israel.

So he takes everybody, he puts them into ruthless labor camps. And then after that, it's not enough. He launches this campaign of infanticide against the people of Israel.

[3 : 46] To put it in our modern language, Exodus is recording some of the worst human rights abuses in history. And the first thing to notice about that is that Pharaoh has made himself God's enemy by doing this.

Exodus is continuing the story of Genesis, which is telling us about a good God that made life to flourish in the world. And Pharaoh has allied himself with death and with chaos and slavery, which is opposed to God and opposed to his plan.

And what that tells us is that this story that we're looking at this morning, it's more than about quality of life, right? This idea of freedom and slavery, it's not just about how good your life is.

It's actually about life and death. To serve God is freedom and life. To serve Pharaoh is slavery and death. Israel, here where we pick up in chapter 3, is under death's thumb.

And God intends to do something about it. So if you look in the first few verses of chapter 3, we're probably familiar with this story, many of us.

[4 : 58] God begins by recruiting Moses. So he calls him from this burning bush that doesn't burn. He beckons him. He says, come into this holy place. This is where I am. This is my presence. This is a special place.

And then he says, I'm the God of your fathers. What he's saying here is, I'm the one that called your family way back hundreds of years ago from Iraq and promised that I was going to use you to set things right.

Now this self-introduction is really important. You could think about Moses and really, he didn't know much about God at all. Now think about Israel.

They had maybe some stories and they had these promises that God had given them in Genesis. They knew about their great-grandfathers, Abraham and Isaac and Jacob, and that they had something to do with this God.

But they didn't have a law. They didn't have a book. They didn't even know God's name. And the point here is that Moses is not out looking for God on the mountain.

[5 : 55] Rather, the liberating God comes into history down on this mountain and he waits there for Moses. He comes into history to reveal who he is and to recruit Moses into this plan that he has to liberate.

That's what happens in verse 7. The Lord said, Look at the verbs there.

God has seen, heard, and knows. I've visited the Holocaust Museum in Israel, Yad Vashem, and the Rwandan Genocide Memorial in Kigali.

And if you go there, you will see pictures of people that were murdered in the Holocaust. And you will hear recordings of people on the radio calling for people to go out and spill Tootsie blood.

And I feel like I knew suffering when I stood over the silos of bones recovered from the mass graves. Perhaps you've been to a place like this, the World Trade Center. Something like that.

[7 : 06] We humans know that we must look upon these things. That we need to be present at these places. That suffering needs to be seen and heard and known. What we see here is such things are seen and heard and known by God.

We may imagine that when things get too ugly, God isn't there. But the first thing we see about God as liberator here and what he reveals to Moses is he's saying, I am steadfastly present.

God is looking into the face of slavery and suffering. He's putting his full gaze upon what is happening to these people in Egypt. His people. He's looking upon humanity's addiction to death and violence.

And then he's going to act in human history to end our slavery. We see it in Exodus here. But we also see it when God enters the world as a man.

When he suffers to end suffering. When we hear in Exodus that God knows their suffering, it doesn't mean God knows.

[8 : 15] It means God knows. God feels that he's had the experience of it. He's present. And his knowledge isn't kind of immune or distant. It leads to compassion and action on behalf of these people.

Our own experience may seem trite compared to the suffering that we've been talking about. And yet, the testimony of the Bible is that God still sees and hears and knows.

God sees our slavery and suffering and he says, I would free you. Verse 8. And if you know the story of Exodus, you know this is exactly what God does.

And you'll see, you know, God brings all of the plagues and the pillar of fire and the column of smoke. And there's water from a rock and bread from heaven. And just this mighty series of events that leads them out of slavery and into freedom.

Out of death and into life. And it's lived out in Israel's experience. And we can read about it and just see so much about who God is through that. But here in our passage, verse 10 is the preview that God gives Moses about that.

[9 : 33] He says, Come, I will send you to Pharaoh that you may bring my people, the children of Israel, out of Egypt. But Moses said to God, Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the children of Israel out of Egypt?

He said, But I will be with you. Don't you love this part? Moses says, Who am I, Lord, to do this?

And God essentially says back to him, Who am I, Moses? Who am I? It's not about you. He says, This shall be the sign for you that I have sent you.

When you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall serve God on this mountain. Okay, so essentially, the sign that you were free from Pharaoh's grip, the sign that I am with you, is when you are back on this mountain in my presence.

And I don't know if this brings much comfort to Moses. I mean, God is essentially saying, You'll know that I kept my promise after I've kept my promise. But it does tell us something really important about how God delivers us from slavery.

[10 : 40] Because where is he taking them? He's taking them to this holy place. He's taking them into his service on the mountain where he's revealed himself to Moses. Now, this is such an important theme in Exodus, is the way that God liberates people.

Because over and over, Moses goes to Pharaoh and he says, Let my people go. And often that's all we remember. We remember the movie, Ten Commandments, and just let my people go, let my people go.

But there's a second half to that sentence. Every single time. Let my people go, that they might worship me. This arc challenges our own understanding of what freedom is.

Because in our own lives, we might wish to be free from many things. Free from worry, free from financial stress, or free from obligations of either morality, or family, or difficult relationships.

And we long for freedom from those things. But what we see here is that God is giving us freedom for something.

[11 : 51] So God grants freedom from slavery and from Pharaoh, but that's not actually enough. He also calls us for freedom. Freedom for worship. Freedom for his service.

And for relationship with him. So the answer is not anarchy. Right? Which is casting off all of the restraints, or the things that we think are kind of, you know, suffocating our own purpose.

Actually, the answer in the Bible is good government. I don't mean, you know, Canada. I mean, I mean the establishment of a just and good and kind rule. By the true king.

As I've thought about this week, I've thought that many of us really want God to overthrow the Pharaoh that's out there. You know, whatever it is that's oppressing us and keeping us from doing what it is that we want to do.

But it's only because we want our own shot at the throne. We want God to deal with Pharaoh out there, but we want him to leave us with a Pharaoh inside, our own self-rule.

[12 : 57] The problem is that the same root of death that blossomed in Egypt and Auschwitz and Rwanda, that death of human violence and sin is in our own hearts as well.

And what that reveals is that we are, we are Pharaohs to ourselves as surely as there's Pharaohs out there that are enslaving us. And so for things to be truly set right, both within and without, we don't need to grow in acceptance of ourselves.

That's the common advice, right? If you want freedom, you just need to accept yourself. But if it's true that we have an inner Pharaoh that's going to put us under slavery, if we're going to enslave ourselves to various things, then we can't free ourselves from ourself, right?

Behavior modification is also not going to cut it. Eating better and getting fitter and, and getting smarter is not going to be able to free us from this inner Pharaoh. There's only one answer, which is that our own inclination to self-rule needs to be cast down.

God needs to become our king. And we can't do it for ourselves. Just the way that Israel was completely helpless until God intervened, we need deliverance.

[14 : 15] We need more than freedom from Pharaoh. We need freedom for right relationship with God. And that freedom for, that, that freedom to know God and be right with him, comes from inner washing and restoration.

And in the story of Exodus, we see that right before they leave Egypt on the Passover night, when all of the lambs are slaughtered on behalf of Israel. This idea of death as a substitute for the death we deserve and can't escape.

And pointing to the fact that there's a costly deliverance that's needed. Not just out there, but in here in the heart of God's own people. That there's a washing and a sacrifice and a substitution needed.

And that's the idea that takes us straight to Jesus. So, let's flip over in our Bibles. Page 816, Matthew 11. Look at verse 27.

All things have been handed over to me by my Father. No one knows the Son except the Father. No one knows the Father except the Son. And anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him.

[15 : 26] Okay, so we're moving from God's work in Exodus, which is the prelude, to this big plan of liberation that God is working in the world. And now we're in Matthew, which is the culmination. Jesus is the culmination of the plan that God has set into motion.

Because in Matthew, we meet the one who is going to actually be able to finally and forever defeat sin and slavery. Jesus is a king. Jesus is God's king.

Jesus is that good government that I was talking about. He's the one that's come to bring freedom to the captive. And Jesus makes this explicit in verse 27, doesn't he? When he says that all things have been handed over to me.

Or given to me by my Father. Okay, so he says here, to serve Jesus is to serve God the Father. To know Jesus is to know the Father. And to serve and know the Father is to know freedom and life.

Okay, so the God who liberates, the God who sees and hears and knows and acts on our behalf, the same God who called Moses, the God that defeated Pharaoh, the God that brought them out of Egypt, what Jesus is saying is that God has now handed over all things to his son Jesus, who has stepped in for the finale as the one true king.

[16 : 40] So in Exodus, I mean, as we're thinking about Exodus, we're kind of seeing it in principle, aren't we? We're a little bit distanced from it. We're seeing in principle that God's character is to look upon the suffering of people and take them out.

But here when we come to Jesus, the address is quite different, isn't it? Jesus speaks directly to us about our own slavery and freedom, about the life and death in our lives. And so he addresses us.

And that's what happens in verse 28. Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. As I worked on this sermon this week, I began to notice how many things I'm enslaved to, how many heavy burdens I bear, and how often I run in exactly the wrong direction when I come to gain awareness of those things.

And so this week, I was acting poorly, and my first thought was always, make more bricks. That's the answer. Make more bricks. Crack the whip. Right?

Try harder. Muscle through it. You're better than this. And then when you realize you're not better than that, self-condemnation. And what I'm describing is legalism.

[17 : 54] I can work, I can will my way through this. I can work or will my way out of slavery. And what happens is that our heavy burden grows heavier. This is actually the voice of Pharaoh, isn't it?

That I'm speaking to myself. Make more bricks. Work harder. What does Jesus say? Come to me, and I will give you rest. Come to me, come to me, come to me, so I wonder if that's something that you've tried in your own life.

And I would invite you to spend some time this week reflecting on the ways that you are enslaved. The things that come up again and again. And I wonder, have you brought that to Jesus?

Have you tried that? Saying, Jesus, this is the thing that I'm enslaved with. And I keep trying to fix it, and I can't fix it, and here it is. I'm enslaved to it. Lord, can you help me?

Jesus gives this offer to any and all, both the enslaved and the self-enslaved. He says, if you're a person that knows toil and pain and exhaustion, come to me, and I will give you rest.

[19 : 10] How does he give us that rest? Well, he breaks the yoke of slavery, and he gives us the yoke of freedom. And we know that the yoke of slavery is what he defeated on the cross when he pays the price for sin.

And the yoke of freedom is what he describes in verse 29. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me. For I am gentle and lowly in heart. You will find rest for your souls.

For my yoke is easy and my burden is light. Jesus' yoke is easy, but it's still a yoke. Remember, it's not if you serve, but who you serve.

Jesus calls us to see him as king, to realize that our life's purpose, that our fulfillment is in service to him. That that is the greatest joy and fulfillment that we can find as people, is in obedience and the transformation into his image.

And so, to take his yoke is to begin by admitting our own inability and saying, I'm surrendering my way of making bricks or of running from God.

[20 : 24] I'm surrendering that and I'm coming under your yoke, Jesus, as I come to you for help. But, as the prayer book reminds us, this service is perfect freedom.

How is it that service can be perfect freedom? It's because we become a servant of the servant. Jesus describes himself here as gentle and humble.

He looks on us with compassion. Just as God did in Exodus, he sees and hears and knows our suffering. And then he acts to save us. even giving up his own life on our behalf on the cross.

It turns out that our service to Jesus is also his service to us. That it's our life and it's our good and it's our rest. As Augustine said, my heart is restless until it finds its rest in you.

Now, when David preached on this text several months ago, he reminded us that a yoke is a tool that is made for two. And so, it joins two animals together and they work side by side.

[21 : 32] And the image here, when we consider it that way, is that Jesus is actually already in the yoke. He's gentle and lowly. He's bearing the yoke. He's walking this slow way of transformation of life and peace.

And he's inviting us, bidding us to join him in that. Jesus knows the way. He bears the weight of that yoke. God the Father and Jesus the Son come to liberate.

It begins today in our heart with forgiveness and this slow work of transformation under Jesus' yoke as we come to him in faith. But take heart because that slow work is going to be overshadowed by an even bigger work, which is that even now, God's big plan of liberation is working its way to completion.

all things groaning and including our own experience as it's just so slow, this restoration. But even now, all things are being fully restored to life and liberty under Jesus' good rule.

Jesus has cast down all rulers and pretenders. He's defeated slavery by taking on the yoke of the cross. One day, every eye will see him, every tongue confess that all things are free in him.

[22 : 49] Pharaoh doesn't stand a chance. Amen.