Truth for Today
The Bible Explained

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Freedom
Free from bondage

[English Standard Version of the Scriptures used unless otherwise stated.]

Free from Bondage
Introduction – What is freedom?
If there is one image which is instantly recognisable, the world over, as an icon symbolising the United States of America, it is perhaps the Statue of Liberty. Standing, as it does, on an island at the entrance to New York Harbour, it greeted the immigrants who entered the country by that route, in their millions, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and was hailed by many of them with a deep and heartfelt thankfulness. At last, it seemed, they had arrived at the home of true liberty, true freedom.

Inscribed on a bronze plaque at its base is a poem by the American author Emma Lazarus, containing the oft-quoted lines, “Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free.” Deeply ingrained in the national identity of the United States is the belief in the cause of freedom, and the nation is often called (after a line in its national anthem) “the land of the free.”

The USA is not, of course, alone in claiming to place such a great emphasis on freedom. Many other nations would make similar claims. We commonly refer to a large part of the globe, wherever, in fact, democracy in some form prevails, as “the free world.” Wars have been waged in the name of freedom, and countless visionaries and campaigners have devoted their lives to some cause which they saw as a struggle for freedom.

What then, is freedom? Today’s talk is the second in a six part series on Freedom, and in this series we are seeking to answer that question by looking into what the Bible says about freedom. Each of these six talks is entitled “Free from.... something or other” and my specific topic today is “Free from bondage.” So I’m going to be looking at the Bible’s teaching about freedom from bondage.

Now, at first sight, we might think that the expression “free from bondage” is too general. After all, isn’t bondage simply the opposite of freedom? But I think the point is that when we talk about bondage (and another word of similar meaning is slavery) we mean a restriction of freedom which is extreme. It is absolute. A slave has no say at all in any of the details of his or her life.

Really free or only claiming to be free?
Before we get into the main body of today’s talk, I want to briefly consider some verses in the gospel by John. We’re going to read from John chapter 8, verses 31 to 36, and I’m reading from the English Standard Version.

> So Jesus said to the Jews who had believed in him, “If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.” They answered him, “We are offspring of

> Abraham and have never been enslaved to anyone. How is it that you say, 'You will become free?'" Jesus answered them, 'Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin. The slave does not remain in the house for ever; the son remains for ever. So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed.'

If you offer someone freedom, as the Lord Jesus does in this passage, a quite likely response is the one here. People say, in effect, "What do you mean? We aren't slaves! How can you say we will be free?"

Now, since the Lord is talking here about freedom from sin, and since that was the subject of last week's talk, I don't want to be doing a re-run of that talk by saying too much about these verses, but I've read them to emphasise one very important point. It's perfectly possible to be a slave, or in bondage, and yet be completely oblivious to the fact.

From Egypt to Canaan

Now, if we're going to look at what the Bible says about freedom from bondage, I think we need to start by grasping the enormous significance of the journey which the children of Israel made, from Egypt to the promised land of Canaan.

In the Bible, this journey was prophesied in the book of Genesis chapter 15[1], hundreds of years before it took place. The historical account of the journey, and of the many highly significant events and developments which took place during it, occupies the greater part of four entire books of the Bible and a little bit of a fifth. It starts early in the book of Exodus, the second book of the Bible, and runs right through to the beginning of Joshua, which is the sixth.

But that is really just the history, although much that is included within it, such as all the details of the Law which God gave through Moses, and of the system of worship for the Tabernacle and later the Temple, can hardly be called history. Leaving the historical account aside, the significance of this journey, its symbolic meaning, and the application of the lessons it was meant to teach, permeate the entire Bible. And it is, essentially, the story of a people who were slaves, under the iron fist of the Egyptian king Pharaoh, and who were freed from that bondage by the outstretched arm of Almighty God, and led by Him, through His servant Moses, across the trackless desert and into the land which He had promised them, the land that was described as "flowing with milk and honey."[2]

In Stephen's far-reaching speech in Acts chapter 7, he refers back to the prophecy given to Abraham in Genesis in these words:

> And God spoke to this effect—that his offspring would be sojourners in a land belonging to others, who would enslave them and afflict them for four hundred years. 'But I will judge the nation that they serve,' said God, 'and after that they shall come out and worship me in this place' (Acts chapter 7 verses 6 & 7).

When the scriptures speak of how Israel's God differs from all the false gods of the nations around, they speak of Him as the Creator[3] but when they remind the people of all that God has done for them, they speak of Him as "He who brought them up out of Egypt."[4,5,6]

It was the event which defined their history, the event stamped upon the collective memory of the nation more than any other.

“Let my people go!”
This great Biblical saga, then, of how God’s people, the children of Israel, were brought out of Egypt into the promised land, is the story of a people who literally experienced what is described in the title of this week’s talk. They were made free from bondage. The early chapters of the book of Exodus provide some details of what that bondage was like. It was harsh and brutal, as described in this passage from the first chapter of Exodus:

> The Egyptians were in dread of the people of Israel. So they ruthlessly made the people of Israel work as slaves and made their lives bitter with hard service, in mortar and brick, and in all kinds of work in the field. In all their work they ruthlessly made them work as slaves (Exodus chapter 1 verses 12b-14).

Into this situation, God sent His servant Moses, with instructions to go to Pharaoh, bringing him the message:

> Thus says the LORD, the God of Israel, ‘Let My people go, that they may hold a feast to Me in the wilderness’ (Exodus chapter 5 verse 1).

What then plays out from chapter 5 through to chapter 12 of the Book of Exodus is a battle between Pharaoh and God, a battle in which God several times repeats, through Moses, the plea “let my people go” and in which, in the face of Pharaoh’s steadfast refusal to give in, God brings down upon the Egyptians a series of ten terrible judgements, the ten famous plagues of Egypt.

This is a battle which Pharaoh cannot win, although he refuses to recognise the fact until the very last plague, the death of every firstborn child in his kingdom. Then and only then, in the middle of the night, as the awful truth begins to dawn on the nation that there is not a house where there is not one dead[7], only then does Pharaoh bend his stubborn will to do what God has asked so many times, and at last he allows the people to leave.

God had already instructed them to be prepared to leave at a moment’s notice, with their belongings all packed and their shoes on their feet ready to go. What a glorious sight that must have been, as this vast company of erstwhile slaves walked free out of the land of their captivity, free from bondage indeed!

I say it was a vast company, and so it was. If you look at the count which Moses did a little later on,[8] counting only the men of military age, and see that they numbered just over 600,000, and that was not counting the tribe of Levi, I think the total population must have been well over 2 million.

The softening of Pharaoh’s heart was actually only temporary. No sooner had the people departed than he changed his mind, and dispatched his chariots and horsemen with orders to capture them and return them to Egypt.

But God would never allow His beloved people to be pulled back into the bondage they had just escaped. The drama which then followed, with the Israelites apparently trapped between the waters of the Red Sea in front of them, and Pharaoh’s army approaching from behind, is well worth reading. It can be found in Exodus chapter 14.

It took that further demonstration of God’s all-powerful arm, stretched out to save His people, even if it meant suspending the laws of nature, before the people not only were free, but came at last to believe it. The waters of the Red Sea were dammed back, creating a passage for the Israelites to cross, where the sea had been, and the waters were then released again as the Egyptians pursued them, so that all of Pharaoh’s army was destroyed. The children of Israel burst forth into

song on the far side of the Red Sea, ecstatic with joy because they could now see that their enemies no longer posed any threat to their freedom[9].

Freedom from bondage for us

We've looked at this great story, of slaves being delivered from bondage and led into freedom, as a great historical event. But God's word always has a message for us today. As this great historical story is expounded and applied in the New Testament, it is abundantly clear that the Christian gospel says to the entire human race, firstly that we are in bondage, and secondly that the Lord Jesus Christ came into the world to set us free from that bondage.

I need at this point just to restate that this talk is part 2 of a series of six talks, all entitled "Free from....something." If we now ask, in what way, according to the scriptures, are we in bondage, then the answer involves what I would describe as an overlap with at least three of the other talks in the series.

Last week's talk was on "Free from sin" and the Bible teaches that, until we accept the Lord Jesus personally as our Saviour, we are in bondage to sin. The verses from John chapter 8, which we read earlier, say so, and so does this verse from Romans chapter 6:

> We know that our old self was crucified with him in order that the body of sin might be brought to nothing, so that we would no longer be enslaved to sin (Romans 6 verse 6).

Next week's talk is entitled "Free from fear." Just as, if we are not yet Christ's, we are in bondage to sin, so also we are in bondage to fear, as witnessed by this verse from Hebrews chapter 2:

> Since therefore the children share in flesh and blood, he himself (that is, the Lord Jesus) likewise partook of the same things, that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, and deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong slavery (Hebrews 2 verses 14-15).

The following week's talk is entitled "Free from the Law" and again, as another verse from Romans, this time from chapter 7, shows, Christ's death on the cross has freed us from bondage to the Law also:

> But now we are released from the law, having died to that which held us captive, so that we serve in the new way of the Spirit and not in the old way of the written code (Romans 7 verse 6).

The Passover

There is one important part of the story of Israel's escape from bondage which I've not mentioned, but it is central to the Bible's teaching on how that historical event is an illustration of our deliverance from bondage through Christ's death on the cross.

The last of the ten plagues is introduced in this way in Exodus chapter 11:

> The LORD said to Moses, 'Yet one plague more I will bring upon Pharaoh and upon Egypt. Afterwards he will let you go from here.....About midnight I will go out in the midst of Egypt, and every firstborn in the land of Egypt shall die, from the firstborn of Pharaoh who sits on his throne, even to the firstborn of the slave girl who is behind the handmill, and all the firstborn of the cattle (Exodus 11 verse 1(part of) verse 4(part of) & verse 5).

Notice that God says that every firstborn in Egypt will die. The children of Israel are to be exempted from this, but only by way of a very special thing which they are commanded to do. Each household is to take a lamb, a one year old male with no imperfections. The lamb is to be killed and eaten by the household on the specific evening when God has announced that the firstborn will die. They are to daub the blood of the lamb on the doorposts and the lintel of the house. God says very clearly that this blood is what will shield them from the plague. Verse 13 of chapter 12 says "When I see the blood, I will pass over you, and no plague will befall you to destroy you, when I strike the land of Egypt."

That glorious divine promise to pass over those who are sheltered under the blood of the lamb is of course the origin of the term Passover, the first in the sequence of feasts which the nation of Israel was later commanded to celebrate every year[10].

But for Christian believers it is far more than that. It is one of the clearest pictures in the Old Testament of how the Lord Jesus died in our place, as our substitute. He is specifically called "the Lamb of God" in the New Testament[11], and Paul, writing to the church in Corinth, says, "Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed."[12]

The Passover, the historical event on that night of nights in Egypt, commemorated to this day by the Jewish nation, is really a prophecy which has been fulfilled. It was fulfilled, actually, to the very day. The so-called Lord's Supper, celebrated by Jesus and His apostles, was the celebration of the Passover, and shortly after it, He was arrested, tried during the night, and crucified on the following day.

But the whole journey, from start to finish, from bondage in Egypt to taking possession of the promised land, is also in a sense prophetic. It can be seen as a symbolic overview of the Christian life. 21st century man may not take kindly to being described as a lost sinner. But, like it or not, that is how we all begin. We start off in bondage, in bondage principally to sin, but bondage, to some extent, to all the things covered by the other talks in this series.

Only by taking the step of faith in Christ can we be delivered from that bondage, and then begin our journey out of Egypt.

Freeing the creation

Up to this point we've thought about our title, "free from bondage", as it applied to the Israelites in the past, and as it applies to Christian believers at the present time. But the scriptures speak of a glorious freeing from bondage which is still future. In Paul's letter to the Romans, chapter 8, he says this:

> For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of him who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to corruption and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. For we know that the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now. And not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies (Romans 8 verses 20 – 23).

When God completed His great work of creation, the topstone of it was Man, placed at the head of it, to rule over the animal kingdom and to husband the earth and its resources. But when sin came into the world, in the garden of Eden, the effects were felt throughout the creation. When Adam and Eve allowed themselves to be taken in by Satan, and disobeyed God, they brought the whole of God's glorious creation crashing down with them.

The verses above describe the tragic consequences. The whole of the creation is in bondage to corruption, and is groaning, like a woman in childbirth. But this, like childbirth, is a temporary situation. When the Lord Jesus returns, those who have believed in Him will enter into what is described here as the glory of the children of God.

Then these words from Romans chapter 8 will be fulfilled, and the entire creation will be set free from its bondage to corruption.

Thank you for listening to this Truth for Today talk on “Free from bondage”, in our series on Freedom - talk number T1480. Scriptures were quoted from the English Standard Version.

Footnote
[1]Gen 15:13-16 [2]Ex 3:8 [3]Ps 96:5 [4]1 Sam 10:18 [5]1 Sam 12:8 [6]1 Kings 8:51 [7]Ex 12:30 [8]Num 1:2-3 [9]Ex 15:1 [10]Lev 23:5 [11]John 1 :29 [12]1 Cor 5:7

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