

Exodus 12 The liberating God

Introduction

It is hard for those of us who have known only freedom to understand the transformative change granted to those who had been born into slavery or its modern counterpart bonded labour. It is also very sobering to recognise that there are more people enslaved today in the twenty-first century than there were in William Wilberforce's day in the 18th century AD or in any earlier century in history. I had the privilege in 2007 of participating in the bicentenary celebrations of the abolition of the slave trade in the British Empire in Ghana –the country through which most of the enslaved people of Africa were shipped to other parts of the world. The lengthy service in Cape Coast Castle, the venue from which slaves were shipped to the British Empire was one of the most emotional services I have ever attended. What was even more remarkable was the fact that at this event we were commissioning a new General Secretary of the Baptist World Alliance Rev. Dr Neville Callum from Jamaica. At the human level it was a remarkable co-incidence that the two events took place at the same time, but I believe in God's providence that it was entirely appropriate given the fact that two or more centuries earlier Dr Callum's ancestors were shipped out of that same venue as enslaved people. Although there was much to celebrate during that week of meetings in Ghana, the pain for many of past remembrance together with sessions on contemporary trials in neighbouring African countries meant that a lot of tears were shed seeking to make sense of the evil choices some have made that have blighted the lives of other people over whom they had seized inappropriate control. Yet as a Christian it must not be 'doom and gloom' about the evil in our world that still remains because we believe in a liberating God who sets people free. We believe in a God who can liberate people from the power of sin, from struggles with addictions of various kinds and from anything that hinders us living the life God intends for us. In Galatians 5:1 Paul wrote: ***It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery.*** Paul in that context was not speaking about literal physical slavery, rather concerning attitudes or life choices that diminish us. Put in a more positive way we recall the words of Jesus in John 10:10: *The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that [you] may have life, and have it to the full.* The book of Exodus contains the story of the formation of the nation of Israel emerging from over four centuries of enslavement. We will look briefly at two key passages related to their liberation before a final one containing some encouraging words from Jesus

1. The declaration (Exodus 3:7-10)

The Lord said, 'I have indeed seen the misery of my people in Egypt. I have heard them crying out because of their slave drivers, and I am concerned about their suffering.'⁸ So I have come down to rescue them from the hand of the Egyptians and to bring them up out of that land into a good and spacious land, a land flowing with milk and honey – the home of the Canaanites, Hittites, Amorites, Perizzites, Hivites and Jebusites.'⁹ And now the cry of the Israelites has reached Me, and I have seen the way the Egyptians are oppressing them.'¹⁰ So now, go. I am sending you to Pharaoh to bring My people the Israelites out of Egypt.' (Exodus 3:7-10)

(a) The problem (Exodus 3:7, 9)⁷ *The Lord said, 'I have indeed seen the misery of My people in Egypt. I have heard them crying out because of their slave drivers, and I am concerned about their suffering...'⁹ And now the cry of the Israelites has reached Me, and I have seen the way the Egyptians are oppressing them.* God is emphasizing that He knew exactly what was going on. He had heard the cries of the people for deliverance from their oppression. Their prayers over the years had not been in vain. This was so important to grasp. There are times when we pray and

it appears that absolutely nothing is happening. On the surface it seems as if God is doing nothing. Yet this is not the case. The ‘yes’ of God’s response was as certain as the first prayer of an Israelite uttered a request for divine action on behalf of His people. Yet the timing of God’s action was most certainly different to the expectations of those who uttered these prayers to God. Part of the delay in this case was the lengthy preparation of Moses in the desert over forty long years. We never know the complexity of the factors involved in God’s responses to our prayers. Just as a human parent may decline the most passionately vocalized request of their child for the best of reasons, so in His infinite wisdom our heavenly Father may choose to answer our prayers in a way that is possibly perplexing to us. This story reminds and reassures us that God never forgets His people with whom He has pledged to do the very best for our spiritual welfare and one day to bring us to our eternal home and transform us to be like His beloved Son. Do you need to hear today the reassurance that God is listening to your prayers?

(b) **The person** (Exodus 3:10) *So now, go. I am sending you to Pharaoh to bring my people the Israelites out of Egypt.* God’s action has general characteristics about His overall plans and purposes, but it also has a personal dimension. God never deals with His children as a vast multitude; rather He knows each of us by name. Using the imagery of a shepherd and his flock Jesus spoke of His relationship with His followers. *I am the good shepherd; I know My sheep and My sheep know Me –¹⁵ just as the Father knows Me and I know the Father – and I lay down My life for the sheep.¹⁶ I have other sheep that are not of this sheepfold. I must bring them also. They too will listen to My voice, and there shall be one flock and one shepherd* (John 10:14-16). This was Moses’ commissioning to service. His marching orders to get on with His life’s work at the age of eighty; the first disciples of Jesus heard these words from the risen Christ in John 20:21: *Again Jesus said, ‘Peace be with you! As the Father has sent Me, I am sending you.* Our missionary God who sent His Son to tell us the good news of the Gospel has commissioned each one of us to be His ambassadors to pass on that good news to other people around us. Paul made this appeal in II Corinthians 5:18-20: *All this is from God, who reconciled us to Himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation:¹⁹ that God was reconciling the world to Himself in Christ, not counting people’s sins against them. And He has committed to us the message of reconciliation.²⁰ We are therefore Christ’s ambassadors, as though God were making His appeal through us. We implore you on Christ’s behalf: be reconciled to God.* We must begin with a heart for people to come to faith. Who are you faithfully praying for to come to know the Lord, week by week? If we are not praying for people to be saved then it is even less likely that we will speak to them about Jesus. Do we ask the Lord how we can be more effective witnesses for Him? The gospel is general for the world, but it is also very personal too; is it transforming your life and mine so that other people see something of Jesus in us?

(c) **The purpose** (Exodus 3:8) ⁸ *So I have come down to rescue them from the hand of the Egyptians and to bring them up out of that land into a good and spacious land, a land flowing with milk and honey – the home of the Canaanites, Hittites, Amorites, Perizzites, Hivites and Jebusites.* Salvation, as the Sixteenth Century Protestant Reformers reminded us, was by grace alone, through faith alone in what Christ has done for us on the cross. However, genuine faith is never alone but produces the fruit of lives that are being transformed by Jesus. James 2:14-24 reminds of that fact. Here Moses was called to a transformed personal relationship with God, but it also had a social dimension that had a significant impact on Israelite society. It involved a twofold purpose. The first was: (i) **Deliverance from Egypt** (v8a) *So I have come down to rescue them from the hand of the Egyptians* the social injustices of Egypt had to be abolished. The individual called by God could not remain silent and say nothing when this evil continued to oppress and destroy people’s lives. What is salutary is that things would get significantly worse before they got better. It would be a huge step of faith for the Israelite

leaders to get on board with Moses and start petitioning Pharaoh to release the Israelites from bondage. They did not realize how great the sacrifice would be before their freedom was obtained. Any goal worth accomplishing involves significant sacrifices of time and effort and resources. God's work in the local church is no different. We have a calling to rescue people from living lives that fall short of the best that God has for them in Jesus. In a world of so much that saddens our hearts and supremely grieves God's heart, we have a gospel of hope to offer to anyone who will receive it. However, the gospel must include a declaration of what people are saved from- sin against God; selfishness in going our way rather than His; (ii) **A Journey to Canaan** (v8b) *and to bring them up out of that land into a good and spacious land.* The best for the people of God is always still to come. Only a handful of younger Israelites in Egypt would stand in the Promised Land, but all needed to do what they could for the benefit of future generations of Israelites. The decisions we take in our Church Meetings are not primarily for the present but hopefully for the future as faith steps declaring our confidence in the future blessing of God. An Egyptian document of the period, the story of Sinuhe described a district of Palestine as: '...a good land...plentiful was its honey...there was no limit to any cattle.' We are not looking to an earthly Canaan, but something far greater. Can you and I pray as Paul did for the Christians in Ephesus (Ephesians 3:20-21)? I pray this may be our prayer as followers of Jesus: *Now to Him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to His power that is at work within us,²¹ to Him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen.*

2. **The deliverance** (Exodus 12:31-42)

(a) **The command to depart** (Exodus 12:31-33) *During the night Pharaoh summoned Moses and Aaron and said, 'Up! **Leave my people**, you and the Israelites! Go, worship the Lord as you have requested.³² Take your flocks and herds, as you have said, and go. And also bless me.'³³ The Egyptians urged the people to hurry and leave the country. 'For otherwise,' they said, 'we will all die!'* The Israelites needed to be freed from a vile oppressive regime that built its pyramids and other public works programmes over the dead and disfigured bodies of the enslaved people. Many of us were here last autumn when Mark Craig of BMS World Mission reported on the horrific abuses of Asian workers in Qatar building stadiums and other infrastructure for the 2022 Football World Cup. The Egyptians were enslaved to a lifestyle built on the suffering of other people. It took a long time before they were willing to let go. It was not just the autocratic rulers of the state who had a conscience problem. The issue was not whether it would happen but when! God keeps His word. The method by which His word comes to pass can often be unexpected. The timing of it likewise; however, we must remember Isaiah 55:11: *...My word that goes out from My mouth: it will not return to Me empty, **but will accomplish what I desire** and achieve the purpose for which I sent it.* The Israelites after suffering for so long may have seriously doubted it would ever happen. We are human after all! But we must remember that God is on the throne. He is in charge of His world and evil people will not have the final word. We have our struggles, but they will not last forever. God will bring us through the dark valleys of trials into the sunshine of His blessings and encouragements. Do you need to hear that today?

(b) **The day of deliverance** (Exodus 12:34-39)³⁴ *So the people took their dough before the yeast was added, and carried it on their shoulders in kneading troughs wrapped in clothing.³⁵ The Israelites did as Moses instructed and asked the Egyptians for articles of silver and gold and for clothing.³⁶ The Lord had made the Egyptians favourably disposed towards the people, and they gave them what they asked for; so they plundered the Egyptians.³⁷ The Israelites journeyed from Rameses to Sukkoth. There were about six hundred thousand men on foot, besides women and children.³⁸ Many other people went up with them, and also large droves of livestock, both flocks and herds.³⁹ With the*

dough the Israelites had brought from Egypt, they baked loaves of unleavened bread. The dough was without yeast because they had been driven out of Egypt and did not have time to prepare food for themselves. The Israelites had worked for many years with no wages. The gifts they sought and received would be at best token compensation for what they had been denied. Wealthy unjustly gained will be recognised in time and sometimes compensation can be made to recompense those who have lost out. God promises *to honour those who honour Him* (I Samuel 2:30b). It may not be equivalent to that which was lost, but in time and sometimes after people have passed on the truth emerges. The picture we have here is of rapid change as people rushed to grab their few belongings and prepare what little food they could before setting off. Almost certainly we are looking at two million plus Israelite men, women and children, together with unidentified people of other racial backgrounds who took advantage of this situation to gain their own freedom. What excitement must have been in the air! The liberating God has kept His word! God hears our prayers and will answer them. However, the opportunities He provides for us going forward may come when we least expect them and at such times we have to be willing to go forward into an uncertain future with Him. He has called us by faith to step out on a faith journey and promises to come with us – and that is all we need! God gave that reassurance to Moses in Exodus 33:14: *The Lord replied, 'My Presence will go with you, and I will give you rest.'* I the same way in the Great Commission to His Church in Matthew 28:20b Jesus declared: *And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.* Will you stop and savour each part of that promise. Who is present? Jesus says: *I am;* to whom is this promise given? *you;* what is the extent of this promise? *to the very end of the age;*

(c) **The fulfilment of the promise** (Exodus 12:40-42) ⁴⁰ *Now the length of time the Israelite people lived in Egypt was 430 years.* ⁴¹ *At the end of the 430 years, to the very day, all the Lord's divisions left Egypt.* ⁴² *Because the Lord kept vigil that night to bring them out of Egypt, on this night all the Israelites are to keep vigil to honour the Lord for the generations to come* (Exodus 12:31-42). Was there any advance warning of the timescale? Yes in Genesis 15:12-15 to Abraham centuries earlier. *As the sun was setting, Abram fell into a deep sleep, and a thick and dreadful darkness came over him.* ¹³ *Then the Lord said to him, 'Know for certain that for four hundred years your descendants will be strangers in a country not their own and that they will be enslaved and ill-treated there.* ¹⁴ *But I will punish the nation they serve as slaves, and afterwards they will come out with great possessions.* ¹⁵ *You, however, will go to your ancestors in peace and be buried at a good old age.* ¹⁶ *In the fourth generation your descendants will come back here, for the sin of the Amorites has not yet reached its full measure.'* The approximate figure to Abraham was a big hint that it was long after he had died that the promise would be fulfilled. What we need to keep before us is that God always keeps His promises. We do want things fulfilled yesterday or today. We struggle to be patient with waiting, but need to keep before us that we are part of something far bigger in the building of God's kingdom. It is a relay race. We receive the baton from Christians of an earlier generation and are entrusted to pass it on to others who follow on after us. Can the liberating God trust you to discharge faithfully the calling He has entrusted to us? Have you taken the first step of trusting Him by faith and becoming a part of His kingdom? As a Christian are you keeping your eyes on the bigger long-term goal of what God is building in His world and the final fulfilment of His purposes when Jesus returns? I hope so!

3. **The invitation** Matthew 11:27-30)

²⁷ *'All things have been committed to Me by My Father. No one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and those to whom the Son chooses to reveal Him.* ²⁸ *'Come to Me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest.* ²⁹ *Take My yoke upon you and*

learn from Me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. ³⁰ For My yoke is easy and My burden is light.' (Matthew 11:27-30)

(a) **Recognising what is available only through Jesus** (11:27) 27 All things have been committed to Me by My Father. No-one knows the Son except the Father, and no-one knows the Father except the Son and those to whom the Son chooses to reveal Him. Hebrews 1:1-3 states: God promised everything to the Son as an inheritance and through the Son He made the universe and everything in it. The Son reflects God's own glory and **everything about Him reflects God exactly**. He sustains the Universe by the mighty power of His command. After He died to cleanse us from the stain of sin, He sat down in the place of honour at the right hand of the majestic God of heaven. Listen to these words from John 14:8-11: Philip said, "Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied." Jesus replied, "Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and yet you still don't know who I am? Anyone who has seen Me has seen the Father! So why are you asking Me to show Him to you? Don't you believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in Me? The words I speak are not My own, but My Father who lives in Me does His work through Me. 11 Just believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in Me. Or at least believe because of the work you have seen Me do. God has gone to extraordinary lengths to have fellowship with us through Jesus. No-one can have an excuse I don't know what God is like because Jesus represents Him exactly as Hebrews 1 reminds us. Jesus then passes on the challenge to us in words that to some people today are offensive –but Jesus said them because they were the truth. In John 14:6 He declared: *I am the way the truth and the life, no-one comes to the Father except through Me*. This fact is at the heart of the gospel. The idea that there are really no substantive differences between religions needs to be held up to careful scrutiny and declared fraudulent. For example, Islam says that Jesus was not crucified. Christianity says He was. Only one of us can be right. Judaism says Jesus was not the Messiah. Christianity says He was. Only one of us can be right. Hinduism says God has often been incarnate. Christianity says God was incarnate only in Jesus. We cannot both be right. Buddhism says that the world's miseries will end when we do what is right. Christianity says we cannot do what is right. The world's miseries will end when we believe what is right" (Alistair Begg, *Made For His Pleasure*, p.126). If there is another way to heaven then Jesus need not have died and then it calls into question the character of a God who would put His Son needlessly through such suffering, if it could have been avoided. There is no way we can earn our salvation it is a free gift from God, through Jesus. We come to God on His terms not ours and this must be recognised. Have you accepted His invitation to fellowship? Will you take that step of faith in response to the gracious call of the Holy Spirit on your life?

(b) **Responding to what God offers to us** (11:28-30) 28 *Come to Me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. 29 Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. 30 For My yoke is easy and My burden is light.*

(i) **The Invitation** (Matthew 11:28) Jesus said: *Come to me* Have you responded to Jesus? At Christmas most of us will have taken pleasure in receiving gifts from people in our families. Some gifts were especially valued in our home because they were made by our children –the monetary value may be minimal but the love invested in time and effort was beyond our calculations. On a far greater level God's investment in our eternal wellbeing was revealed in its fullness in Jesus. He took the big step of going to the cross; He has the authority to give the most precious gift in all the world- eternal life. He knows we cannot live in our own resources –life without Jesus is missing the point of our life on earth. Life in the fullness He offers (John 10:10) is only possible if we are living in the way He intends for us and in the power of His Holy Spirit – not in our own strength. He describes people in need of Him as *weary* –that is at the end of our own resources –at the end of searching through various religious beliefs or secular approaches to life and finding nothing that satisfies; there are also people who are *heavily burdened* –emphasis here is concerning issues that have been going on for a long time. It's time to stop running and hand over our lives to Him; He promises as one version puts it *I will refresh you*. I will give you the sense of purpose you need for your life. Give you the direction for which you have been searching for possibly even years; for

salvation, but also to Christians for renewal if we have gone away from the Lord in our hearts –even if in body we have outwardly gone on as before –in such situations to cry out in the words of the older song ‘Spirit of the Living God fall afresh on me’.

(ii) **The Opportunity** (vs29-30) *Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For My yoke is easy and My burden is light;* Oxen 2000 years ago were measured for their yoke to make sure it fitted properly so that it would not damage their necks when working in the fields. Care was taken to preserve the animal so that it could work effectively and for more years –not just for the sake of animal welfare. How much more God our Father has plans for our lives. Usually a young oxen was paired with an older experienced one that could show it how to plough the fields or accomplish the familiar task. God does not leave us to get on serving Him on our own He provides the Holy Spirit to strengthen us, but also a community of faith, the church, in order that together we might encourage one another in our spiritual journey. The Jewish religious leaders of the day (the Pharisees) spoke of ‘the yoke of the Law’, but it had become so oppressive to ordinary people that religious regulations were preventing them meeting with God –the opposite of what had been intended. Jesus came to reveal afresh God’s plans for His people and to model a lifestyle for us to copy. Paul reminded the Philippian Christians with these words: *Your attitude should be the same that Christ Jesus had* (Phil.2:5 NLV). Jesus’ words in v30 must not be taken to mean that being a Christian is easy- it may be a much harder life to lead, but we don’t do it on our own He goes with us each step of the way encouraging us on. With His help we can be overcomers but there is a cost to gaining the spiritual crown or reward promised by God for those who live for Him. It was made plain in Philippians 3:8-11 in which Paul declares his heartfelt desires: *I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them rubbish, that I may gain Christ and be found in Him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ— the righteousness that comes from God and is by faith. I want to know Christ and the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in His sufferings, becoming like Him in his death, and so, somehow, to attain to the resurrection from the dead.* The liberating God calls each one of us to trust and follow Him. I pray that each of us will do so, for Jesus’ sake, Amen.