

# Exodus 13-14

## The Great Escape

### Notes from a sermon preached at Christ Church Liverpool

**Main point:** God glorifies himself and completes the promised rescue of his deluded people to serve him by decreating Egypt and its army.

**Main application:** Believe that freedom is not merely avoiding judgment but the defeat of your enemies by a stronger, kinder master.

What is the worst thing that you can say about your boss? Or your boyfriend? What word could you use to describe them to a friend that would be pretty much guaranteed to make them nod their head in sympathy and say things like "no?" or "really?" or "she never?" Well there are probably a few candidates but, of all the things we might be likely to say, I reckon that one of the worst insults is probably calling someone "controlling." We live in a culture where the idea that someone else would tell us how to live is pretty much one of the worst things that could happen.

Lottery winners often talk about sticking with the jobs they already have but I wonder how many of them, a few weeks after they go back to work when they are asked to do something they really don't want to do by their boss, or are told off in some way by their supervisor tell the person where to stick their job and walk away.

Let's face it, we've almost all imagined what it would be like to be able to do that haven't we? Thought to ourselves "if it wasn't for the fact that I need the money I'd tell her where she could stick her job."

For many of us the reason we want to be rich is often not as much about all the cool stuff we could buy (after all you don't have to be very rich in our society to have possessions that even the richest people could only dream of 50 or even 25 years ago). Instead, often, we want money because we believe money brings us freedom. Money gives us independence from having to do what others ask.

The fact that we think very much in those terms; that the thing we desire most is independence is a reflection of our culture's view of what it means to be free. Our society, on the whole, takes the view that freedom is only possible when we are not obliged to anybody. Freedom, as the Soup Dragons said, is being able to do what I want, whenever I like anytime at all.

Because that's the way we think of freedom we also tend to have a particular way of thinking about rescue. What kind of rescue do you think most people want today? Or, to put that another way, what bits of the Christian message do people who are not Christians find most superficially attractive?

I don't think you'd have to go out and ask very many people that question before you realised that the kind of Christianity most people think they would like is one where God forgives any wrongdoing and then allows us to do what we want to do. The kind of God we like the idea of is a God who forgives us and lets us get on with our lives. People want a God who is a saviour, but not a God who is a King.

Of course when you think about it there's an inherent contradiction in that position. Because if we recognise, as I think most of us do deep down, even if we don't admit it, that there are things in my life that need forgiveness, then of course it's precisely because I have been doing what I want that I have morally messed up. So why we think that it would be loving of God to allow us to carry on as our own spiritual directors do isn't clear.

You would think a look round our society which, in terms of freedom to do what I want, is one of the freest groups of people in the world ever would convince you that perhaps this kind of freedom doesn't really make people that happy and fulfilled. After all we are wealthy enough to pretty much guarantee that nobody has to be without food, shelter and clothing, we able to choose our own government, our own friends and even the country where we live and we're not mostly that happy!

Is true freedom really about not being obliged to anyone? Is true rescue really about being forgiven and allowed to get on with your life? Exodus 13 and 14 answer those questions with a resounding no.

In these chapters we see that the very heart of the problem the Israelites faced as they left Egypt was not that they were serving Pharaoh. It was that they were not serving God.

In these chapters we learn that freedom is not merely avoiding judgment but the defeat of your enemies by a stronger, kinder master.

True freedom is not simply forgiveness. True freedom is not just avoiding judgment. In fact freedom from judgment is only half a rescue. Why? Because to be truly free your enemy must be decisively destroyed and you must instead serve the God of glory.

#### **Freedom from judgment is only half a rescue because...**

- **Your enemy must be decisively destroyed**

As the Israelites tribes walked out of Egypt bags and bags of gold, silver and precious stones that the Egyptians had given them to persuade them to leave as quickly as possible the Israelites must have been feeling pretty good. God had spared them from the terrible destruction of the firstborn sons. He had ensured that they left Egypt wealthier than most of them would ever have dreamed of. And as soon as the people of Israel encamped, sheltering under whatever they had been able to carry or pick up on the way, God made his presence known among them. Just as the Lord had previously appeared to Moses in a burning bush, so now he appeared to the whole nation of Israel in cloud and fire, to show them that he was about to fulfill his promises to give Abraham's descendents a land of their own.

But, for all that they must have been rejoicing, these tribes were still in a very precarious position. Our translation tells us that they were, 13:18, equipped for battle. In the original

Hebrew that says, literally, that they were 'in groups of 50'. They were split up into squads as all armies, ancient and modern, tend to be. But, as much they might have arranged themselves into platoons and regiments the reality was that they were very recently ex slaves.

Very few of them would have had any experience of leadership. None of them would have been skilled in handling weapons, because the Egyptians main fear about he Israelites was that they would turn against them in war. So they would hardly have taught them how to fight! They probably had very few weapons.

An army that didn't even have time to let its bread rise before they packed was never going to be well equipped in terms of things to survive in the desert wastes that made up much of Egypt away from the Nile. God's people were ill-equipped and untrained.

Which makes what God does next seem quite bizarre. Instead of taking them by the most direct route to the land he has promised to them, God leads them on another road because he thinks that, 13:17, if they have to fight the Philistines they might change their minds about this rescue and go back to Egypt. Which seems reasonable enough; until you see where he leads them instead! Rather than leading them towards the Philistines, God takes the Israelites to a place where they are, literally, stuck between the Egyptians and the deep Red Sea! Now they face not the powerful armies of the Philistines, but the massively more powerful Egyptians army, the most impressive fighting force in the world at that time. An army that dispatches, according to 14:7, 600 of the latest model chariots, the fighter jets of the ancient world, together with probably thousands of other chariots, cavalry and, most likely, infantry as well.

Imagine you are an Israelite looking out across the plain at the army of the masters you have just abandoned coming to get you. I'm pretty sure that we would be, as they were, 14:10, terrified. We might even resort to the same bizarre revision of history as they do in v12: "Didn't we say to you in Egypt 'leave us alone; let us serve the Egyptians?'" Well no, actually, you didn't say that! There's no hint that the Israelites ever made such a request. Sometimes they were angry with Moses but they never, ever expressed any desire to serve the Egyptians. Why would they have said such a thing? The Egyptians were terrible masters who oppressed the people and killed their children. This isn't history talking - it's wishful thinking under extreme pressure.

But Moses isn't willing to get into a discussion about what they did or did not say at the time. Instead, in his finest hour, Moses simply tells the people not to panic and to trust that God will fight for them. And God does. The Egyptian army was one of the few things to emerge relatively unscathed from the previous judgments. But now God will destroy it.

As Pharaoh receives reports back at HQ it seems the Israelites are trapped in a corner. Pharaoh begins to think that maybe here is an opportunity both to destroy their troublesome leaders and to recapture some cowed, defeated, submissive slaves; exactly the kind he wants. So he sets out with his army. We don't know exactly when, but at some point Pharaoh himself turns back - he is not

recorded amongst the drowned, as surely he would have been if he had died. Pharaoh leaves his army to face the Lord, who lures them into the sea and to a terrible death.

It's worth taking just a moment to think about the actual events of this chapter. Lots of people have disputed whether such an event could really be possible. They suggest that the crossing of the Israelites perhaps took place at a shallow sea known as the sea of reeds and that they waded across, the Egyptians then followed and got stuck.

But such a theory doesn't explain why the Egyptians followed. No chariot commander who knew what he was about would ever take his chariot onto anything other than dry ground - the narrow wheels and heavy weight were a disaster on anything damp and soggy. Even if the charioteers did go into the shallow sea and got stuck that wouldn't have drowned them - at worst they could simply have abandoned their chariots and walked home.

No, the account Moses gives makes clear that the Lord engineered the defeat of Pharaoh's armies in a much more spectacular way. Great rushing winds somehow created a pathway through the deep water - the word used for the "walls" of water in v22 is the one usually used for the walls of the city rather than the walls of a house. A pathway that was not for wading but for walking.

Not only that but the Lord moved in his pillar of cloud and fire so that, 14:20 that as the Israelites struck camp and began to head into this miracle pathway the Egyptians were stuck in a terrible darkness. The darkness must have reminded them of the 9<sup>th</sup> plague and made the more perceptive Egyptian soldiers realize that, just as last time, the darkness would be followed by death. The Israelites, however, enjoyed the light of the presence of God to enable them to begin their journey.

For most of the Israelites this must all have been quite nerve-racking. But I think Moses would have been quite calm. Because what God was doing here was really just a huge scale version of what Moses had experienced as an infant. As a baby in a basket floating on the Nile Moses had already passed through water from a place where he was facing certain death to a place of safety and protection. As God had graciously rescued Moses so he was now rescuing all the Israelites.

But God was not just rescuing. He was also judging. God often uses water as a sign of judgment. That's what happened way back near the beginning of history when God, in just judgment for massive and terrible human sin, flooded the entire world and saved just one family, through whom he would rebuild the human race - Noah and his children.

Now God will use the waters of the Red Sea as a final judgment on Egypt - an 11<sup>th</sup> plague if you like. The judgment is not harsh or undeserved; in fact it is entirely appropriate. If you've been here throughout our series you'll remember this was a nation that had tried to destroy the people of Israel by drowning their children. Throughout the Bible the punishments of God always fit the crime; it is totally fitting that this army, whose soldiers drowned helpless infants for no crime other than their ethnic origin, should themselves be drowned as they hunt down a bunch

of unarmed refugees whose only desire is to flee the country.

But there's another reason why God judges the Egyptians using water. It's not just poetic justice. It's also de-creation. You see the Egyptians thought that their gods created the world they lived in. But throughout the plagues of judgment the Lord sends on Egypt he gradually undoes more and more of the created order so that at this point the world of the Egyptians has returned to a state of watery chaos and darkness. As God comes in judgment their world is exactly like the whole world was before God began his work of bringing order and blessing. God, the one true God, the Lord, is showing the Egyptians, and us, that he alone is in charge of the world.

Think about how absolutely necessary this was for the Israelites' freedom. If God had not destroyed this enemy their liberty would have lasted only a few short days. For all the forgiveness that God offered them as the destroyer passed over their homes they would soon have been captured and enslaved again if their enemy had not been defeated.

Without the defeat of their enemies freedom from judgment would only have been half a rescue. These enemies were so powerful that it was undoubtedly beyond the ability of the Israelites even to take them on. They were so powerful that only the same power of God that had been exerted in creation could defeat them.

Exactly the same applies, of course, to me and you. Think about the things that God forgives us for. He forgives us for the way we treat others badly in order to protect our own reputations. He forgives us for the way we misuse other people's bodies for our own sexual pleasure. He forgives us for the way we ignore the needs of the poor because we want to impress other people with our wealth. He forgives us for the way that we imagine that getting ahead in career, sport, love or wealth will provide the comfort and security that we need.

But, as we thought about in detail in our series on idolatry last year, those things entrap and enslave us just as much as any human slave master. If all that God did was forgive us for our abuse of those things and didn't destroy the power that lies behind them, we would not really be any better off than we were before. Those things would still be as attractive as they were before.

Just like the Egyptians were attractive to the Israelites. The Israelites didn't want to go back to Egypt because they really thought it was great (even if they deceived themselves that it wasn't too bad). No they wanted to go back because they thought the choice was between being enslaved again and being destroyed. Who told them they would be destroyed if they abandoned their old masters? The Egyptians did!

It's the same for us. Our idols, the things we worship, threaten us with destruction if we abandon them. How can you really live if you commit yourself to giving your money away instead of keeping it, they ask? How can you really be alive if you allow other people to wrong you but refuse to wrong them in return, they demand? Our idols threaten

that our lives will be meaningless or empty without them. That means it is not enough for us just to be forgiven; our enemy must be destroyed.

That is exactly what has happened through Jesus Christ. When he poured out his blood on the cross what Jesus did wasn't just act as our Passover lamb, meaning that on the last terrible day of judgment God's destroyer will pass over us. He also defeated our enemy, the spiritual director of evil, the one who stood behind the evil Pharaoh did, the one who stands behind all the idols we worship in our weakness.

Turn with me to Colossians 2:13-15: *He forgave us all our sins, having canceled the written code, with its regulations, that was against us and that stood opposed to us; he took it away, nailing it to the cross. And having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross.* The freedom that is brought to anyone who trusts him by Christ's death is more than just forgiveness. Because Jesus defeated the devil and his minions. Satan tries to tell us that we cannot live without our idols. Satan wishes to make us believe that if I cannot find my satisfaction and meaning for life in career, sex, leisure and ambition my life will be empty, that I will be destroyed. But that's not true. Because, like Pharaoh's armies, Satan has been defeated. The cross of Christ destroys the power of the devil.

At the cross it looked like God had foolishly planned things so that his son whom he loved was backed into a corner where the only way out was death. Just like it looked that at the Red Sea God had foolishly planned things so that Israel, his son whom he loved, was backed into a corner where the only way out was death. But, just as Israel passed unharmed through the death of the sea and God drowned the Egyptians in their wake, so Jesus passed, finally unharmed, through death itself and destroyed the devil in his wake.

If you are to be truly free your enemy must be decisively destroyed. That is what Christ has done for his people. This morning if you are a Christian your enemy the devil is defeated. Though he has not yet been thrown into the sea of fire that fate is now inevitable for him, and you can rejoice that abandoning whatever other gods you may have had in your life will not lead to your destruction but to true freedom.

You are free when you are forgiven, when your enemy is decisively destroyed and when you serve the God of glory...

**And freedom from judgment is only half a rescue because...**

- **You are only free when you serve the God of glory**

For many people the story of the Exodus is about the freedom of independence.

I am in the middle of reading an excellent book about the American war of independence, the war that was fought from 1775 to 1783 when 13 British colonies in North America fought the British government over something that, in the end, boiled down to being able to set their own taxes and elect their own MPs – no taxation without representation was their slogan. For many of these

“patriots” (as they called themselves) or “rebels” (as the British called them!) the book of Exodus was an inspirational tale. A tale of God liberating people and setting them free. God, they thought, must be on their side. On the British side some 120,000 black men fought. Why? Because the British promised that if they won they would no longer be slaves. These people would be set free. For these African Americans the book of Exodus was also an inspirational tale. A tale of God liberating people and setting them free. God, they thought, must be on their side. Well, no doubt both the patriots and the African-Americans both had legitimate grievances against those who oppressed them. But they were both wrong about Exodus.

Because this is not a story about people being set free from serving Pharaoh to be their own masters. It is a story about them being set free to serve a new master. Do you remember what the Israelites remembered themselves saying in 14:12 – “Leave us alone. let us serve the Egyptians.” They understood that the choice was between two masters. They knew that they were either going to serve the Egyptians or the Lord. And, at that moment, they felt like the Lord wasn’t going to be able to protect them and they would be better off going back to their old masters.

But, as they walked on dry land through the Red Sea, they moved out of reach of their old masters. The enemy was defeated and there was no going back. Do you notice what they did in response? They didn’t start an annual independence day. Instead, v31, “they feared the Lord and put their trust in him and in Moses his servant.”

Just a few weeks later God gave them laws to live by that included the following provision: *“If you buy a Hebrew servant, he is to serve you for six years. But in the seventh year, he shall go free, without paying anything.”* Why does that matter? Well imagine what would have happened if they thought they had been set free to just follow their own way rather than to serve the Lord. It wouldn’t have been long before the stronger Israelite tribes started treating the weaker ones in exactly the same ways that they themselves had been treated by the Egyptians. Because of you think you are free from being obliged to anybody the only thing you will serve is yourself; a kind of service that is destructive to you and those around you.

The truth is that total freedom with no obligation to anybody is not possible. In the end we, like the Israelites, are always serving someone. And you can only be truly free when you serve the God of glory. Why is that? Well there are loads of reasons why only serving the Lord can make you free that the Bible outlines and develops for us – that’s something for a whole sermon series not the conclusion to one talk! But this passage hints at two reasons why only serving the Lord, the God of the Bible, can lead to true freedom.

The first one is that the Lord loves his people. God is concerned about the fate of the Israelites because he hates the fact that the people of Israel are suffering and oppressed. He rescues them because he has pity on them and cares for them. Many of the other things we serve – money, fame, career or looks – have no emotions at all. Those things can never make you free because they do not love you. That’s even more true of the one who stands

behind all the world’s selfishness and sin – Satan himself loves no one, which means all he can do is destroy you.

The second reason why only serving the Lord can lead to true freedom is that he doesn’t need us. Pharaoh NEEDS the Israelites. Not only are they the slave labourers who make his kingdom great, but their loss is a blow to his ego and his image.

But God is not like that. God is not dependent on the Israelites for his glory or his victory. Indeed this victory, possibly the most impressive in the Old Testament, is accomplished without the Israelites doing anything more than walking! And it’s the same right through the story of Israel. They win victories because Moses get his hands propped up by two people standing either side of him. They win victories because they march round a city seven times and blow a trumpet. They win victories because God wins for them. God is not in this relationship because he needs them.

Many of the people who appear to love us in this world are actually people who need us. That person you are dating may genuinely care for you, but he may also be in the relationship partly because having a girlfriend is vital to his self-image. Most people’s parents really do love them. But we are also prone to living out our dreams and hopes through our children.

That ‘neediness’ is seen in friendships, in family relationships and between lovers. It means that when we ask others to do particular things, to behave in certain ways, we are often driven as much by what we think we need as much as by what is genuinely best for the other person.

God is the only person in the universe who is not needy. Which means that he is the only person in the universe who you can be free serving. Because the things he asks of his servants are always the things that are best for them.

This morning, whoever you are, whether you are here investigating the Christian faith, or whether you have trusted in Jesus for forgiveness since before you can remember I want to urge you not to be deceived by our society’s terrible definitions of freedom and rescue.

Someone else being in control of your life is not the worst thing that can happen. Because true freedom is not being forgiven and then left to do whatever you want. You cannot be truly free unless your enemies are destroyed and you serve the God of glory. On his cross Jesus Christ defeated all the powers of evil that hate people and want to destroy them.

That means that this morning each of us will be able to commit ourselves to serving and living for the Lord, for the God of glory, for Jesus. That is the only way to freedom.

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