

Free At Last!
Exodus 12:37–13:32
Series: Book of Exodus [#09]
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Introduction

“Free at last! Free at last! Thank God Almighty, we are free at last!”¹ These words of Martin Luther King Jr. from over forty five years ago still resonate with millions of people. They were the closing words of his “I Have A Dream” speech. They did not reflect the political and civil rights reality of 1963, but looked to the future, to his dream of true, full freedom ringing out in every corner and for every person in his country.

The old spiritual which inspired his words spoke about spiritual freedom. The last verse speaks of the freedom that comes from leaving this world and going to be with God. “Some of these mornings, bright and fair, I thank God I’m free at last. Goin’ to meet King Jesus in the air. I thank God I’m free at last.”²

Yes, “Free at last! Free at last! Thank God Almighty, we are free at last.”³ This theme also expresses the prayers and praises of Israel 3,500 years ago in their first moments of freedom after over 80 years of slavery, and a total of 430 years in Egypt. God has delivered the final plague or judgment on Egypt. All their firstborn are dead. In the middle of the night the Pharaoh desperately called for Moses and told him that he and all the Israelites were to leave Egypt—*NOW!*

As we pick up the account in chapter 12 at verse 37, Israel is literally taking their first steps in freedom—they were *free at last!* This section gives us much more than history. It gives insight into how we who have been set free from slavery to sin by Jesus Christ are to take our steps in freedom. There are things to remember and to live. First, remember and live in...

Your Deliverance By God.

As we think about God delivering Israel from slavery in Egypt, we need to start with His promise of deliverance. The first promise was not given to Moses. It was given to Abraham many years earlier. God told him

“Know for certain that your descendants will be strangers in a land that is not theirs, where they will be enslaved and oppressed four hundred years. But I will also judge the nation whom they will serve, and afterward they will come out with many possessions.”

(Genesis 15:13-14)

God gave this promise again when He called Moses, as recorded in chapter 3. And God repeated and confirmed this promise along the way during the encounters with the Pharaoh (e.g., 6:1, 6-8).

As we move from them to ourselves and the rest of the human family, we remember that God long ago promised the complete, final deliverance from our slavery to sin. In fact, He gave this promise after our first parents sinned. God, addressing Satan in the serpent said, “I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your seed and her seed; He shall bruise you on the head, and you shall bruise him on the heel” (Genesis 3:15). This speaks of Christ being bruised on the heel, that is, dying on the cross for us. But through His death and resurrection He bruised Satan and his forces on the head, He sealed their defeat and judgment.

God’s promise of deliverance from sin is repeated on through the Old Testament. One beautiful extended passage is in Isaiah chapters 52 and 53. Listen to verses 4-6 in chapter 53 which speak of Christ.

“Surely our griefs He Himself bore, and our sorrows He carried; yet we ourselves esteemed Him stricken, smitten of God, and afflicted. But He was pierced through for our transgressions, He was crushed for our iniquities; the chastening for our well-being fell upon Him, and by His scourging we are healed. All of us like sheep have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; but the LORD has caused the iniquity of us all to fall on Him.”

Then, when Jesus was here on earth to fulfill this promise He said, “So if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed.” (John 8:36)

We all know that it is one thing to make a promise and another to deliver on that promise. Thankfully, there never is a discrepancy with God—what He promises He does, all the time, every time. So let’s look at God’s action of deliverance. God’s powerful deliverance of Israel as captives in Egypt began with His call of Moses in chapter 3. He continued to work powerfully until the last judgment or plague compelled the Pharaoh to let Israel go. When Israel moved out, God told Moses

“...Remember this day in which you went out from Egypt, from the house of slavery; for *by a powerful hand* the LORD brought you out from this place.” (13:3)

It was God’s supreme, limitless power that fulfilled His promise of deliverance.

God’s deliverance of us as captives in sin also was brought about by His limitless power. There is an interesting contrast that emphasizes God’s great power in our salvation. We start with Psalm 8:3 where David speaks of the heavens, including the moon and stars, as “the work of [God’s] fingers.” Now turn to Isaiah 52 where we read in verse 10, “The LORD *has bared His holy arm* in the sight of all the nations, that all the ends of the earth may see the salvation of our God.” God’s creation of all the heavens, the universe, is the dainty, fine work of His fingers. But in our salvation God *bared his arm*, He used full force.

So Paul wrote in Romans 1 that Christ “was declared the Son of God *with power* by the resurrection from the dead, according to the Spirit of holiness ...” (4). Yes, God delivered on His promise by His great power.

This brings us back to remembering and living this truth. God gave Israel the Passover and many other observances as a way to remind them of what He had done, and to live in light of it—to live as God’s delivered people. God did that because He knew people can easily and quickly forget what He does for them. In fact we only have to turn a page or two to chapter 15 to see Israel losing sight of God’s power, love, faithfulness and provision and their beginning to complain.

We are not any different. We too can easily and quickly forget. That is one of the reasons Jesus gave us the observance of Communion—to focus on, to remember what Christ did for us on Calvary’s cross. It is why Jesus said, “Do this *in remembrance* of Me” (1 Corinthians 11:24). And so God tells us through Paul “It was for freedom that Christ set us free; therefore keep standing firm and do not be subject again to a yoke of slavery” (Galatians 5:1). You don’t have to be the slave of sin, of any sin, any longer! Take your stand—not on or in yourself, but in God and in the full spiritual armor He has provided. It *is* a battle. It *is* spiritual warfare. But victory is guaranteed as you stand in Christ and in the strength of His might (cf. Galatians 6:10).

Next, you are to remember and live in ...

Your Devotion To God.

What does it mean to be *devoted to God*? The word *devote* means to give to, to set aside for, to consecrate for a person, purpose or thing. RRSPs are investments set aside, dedicated for, *devoted to* retirement income. Part of devotion is a transfer of ownership. When we devote our money, time, talents, when we devote ourselves to God, we are handing over the title, the ownership and control to God. Christ sets us free from the power of sin so we can know Him and His everlasting life, but also so we can serve Him. We live in our freedom as we actually are *devoted* to Him.

There are several aspects of devotion in this section. First, true devotion to God is grounded in His Word. Go to 13:9.

“And it shall serve as a sign to you on your hand, and as a reminder on your forehead, that the law of the LORD may be in your mouth; for with a powerful hand the LORD brought you out of Egypt.”

The key point here is that “the law of the LORD is to be in your mouth.” That is, you and I are to be familiar with, grounded in God’s truth in the Bible so that what we think and then say lines up with and flows from the Bible’s truth.

Turn ahead to the sixth verse of Deuteronomy chapter 6.

“These words, which I am commanding you today, shall be on your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your sons and shall talk of them when you sit in your house and when you walk by the way and when you lie down and when you rise up” (6-7).

You cannot live in freedom over sin without reading and living the Bible.

Then, true devotion to God is something which flows from grateful, loving obedience to Him. As chapter 13 opens, God instructs Moses and the people to sanctify, or set aside to Him all the firstborn males and also to keep the Passover each year. What God instructs He expects. God never intended and never accepts simply going through the motions—

- doing something because *we always do it*;
- doing something because *we have to*;
- doing something without entering into it with our heart, soul and mind.

In Deuteronomy 6:5 God said, “You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.” Israel was to be devoted to, to love God with their entire being. And you cannot be truly devoted to God without obeying Him. In the opening section of Deuteronomy 6 God told them,

- to do His commandments (2);
- to be careful to do His commandments (3);
- to have His commandments at the core of their being, in their hearts (6);
- and to keep His commandments before them at all times (8-9).

This obedience is to flow from gratitude and love for God’s great deliverance—Israel had been slaves, now He has set them free!

This was not just for the time immediately after the Exodus. It is to be a quality of all God’s people in every generation. Jesus tells us, “If you love Me, you will keep My commandments” (John 14:15). Yes, true devotion to God is something which flows from grateful, loving obedience to Him.

There is one more thing about true devotion to God here. True devotion is displayed in individual and corporate lives of worship. The last part of chapter 12 and the first part of chapter 13 give some of God’s instructions about observing Passover and dedicating firstborn males to Him. All of Israel was to worship God in these things. They were to worship God individually, and also collectively as families, communities and a nation.

That principle has not changed. Today, however, many people consider themselves spiritual, but not religious. The spiritual values or explorations they have are personal and private, not as a part of a community. They are spiritual freelancers.⁴ And so, it is not

surprising to see many people, as one person said, looking at Sundays as a time to play in a park, not to pray in a pew.⁵

True saving faith is personal. It also is to be lived out in collective worship and service. This is God's design and standard. In the very first days of the church, Acts 2 tells us that those believers "were continually devoting themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer" (42). About 30 years later the writer of Hebrews linked steadfast faith and productive service for God to consistently meeting together with other believers (10:23-25).

I realize that I am, as it is said, *preaching to the choir, or preaching to the converted*. You are *here in the pews* this morning, not *out in the parks*. At the same time, we need to realize the pressures and temptations to play down the importance of our collective life of worship. Being in church is not about collecting attendance awards or brownie points. It is about entering into the ways in which God meets with us, hears us, speaks to us, encourages and strengthens us that are different than when we meet with Him on our own. Yes, remember and live in your devotion to God. Then, finally, remember and live in ...

Your Direction From God.

When we talk about God's direction, often the first questions are something like "How can I know God's will?" Let's start with the foundational, unchanging truth that God is always with us, and ahead of us. We see a practical, tangible example of this at the end of chapter 13. Look at verse 20.

"Then they set out from Succoth and camped in Etham on the edge of the wilderness. The LORD was going before them in a pillar of cloud by day to lead them on the way, and in a pillar of fire by night to give them light, that they might travel by day and by night. He did not take away the pillar of cloud by day, nor the pillar of fire by night, from before the people" (20-22).

God was with them. They could see the evidence of His presence 24 hours a day! How reassuring this was!

Forty years later, as they prepared to enter their land, Moses told the people that "the Lord your God himself will cross over [the Jordan into the land] ahead of you" (Deuteronomy 31:3), and that God "will never leave you or forsake you" (8).

Then as Joshua took over leadership from Moses, God told him, "As I was with Moses, so I will be with you; I will never leave you or forsake you" (Joshua 1:5). And also, "Be strong and courageous. Do not be terrified; do not be discouraged, for the Lord your God will be with you wherever you go" (Joshua 1:9).

Move ahead about 400 years to those beautiful, reassuring words from King David in Psalm 139.

“Where can I go from Your Spirit? Or where can I flee from Your presence? If I ascend to heaven, You are there; if I make my bed in Sheol [death], behold, You are there. If I take the wings of the dawn, if I dwell in the remotest part of the sea, even there Your hand will lead me, and Your right hand will lay hold of me. If I say, ‘Surely the darkness will overwhelm me, and the light around me will be night,’ even the darkness is not dark to You, and the night is as bright as the day. Darkness and light are alike to You” (7-12).

“Okay,” you may say, “but what about me? God is not present with me in a visible way!” God, who does not change, is always with and ahead of you. Hebrews 13 tells us not to fix our security on money or things of this world, but on God who has said, “I will never desert you, nor will I ever forsake you” (5). So you can be confident because God is always with you ... in every moment, in every circumstance.

Building on the reality of God’s constant presence is the truth that God will always lead us. As Israel set out on their quick exit from Egypt, God led them. Again, notice how merciful God was by leading them with the pillar of cloud and the pillar of fire. Here were two million or so people leaving the only land their families had known for over 400 years. How were they to do this? Which route were they to take? For the next forty years God led them literally step by step. Knowing His people, knowing their enemies, knowing His plan for them, God did not chart a straight line course. He led them, 13:18 tells us “around by the way of the wilderness to the Red Sea.”

And so God always leads His people. In Psalm 31:8 God tells us “I will instruct you and teach you in the way which you should go; I will counsel you with My eye upon you.” Through Isaiah God declared

“And the LORD will continually guide you, and satisfy your desire in scorched places, and give strength to your bones; and you will be like a watered garden, and like a spring of water whose waters do not fail.”
(58:11)

And Jesus has told us this is still true for us.

“But when He, the Spirit of truth, comes, He will guide you into all the truth; for He will not speak on His own initiative, but whatever He hears, He will speak; and He will disclose to you what is to come.”
(John 16:13)

Yes, God is always with us and He will always lead us. “But, if that is true,” you may ask, “then why don’t I have a clue as to what God want me to do next, what His will is for me?” That brings us to the next critical point ... we are to follow God step by step for the entire journey.

Let's look at this principle here in Exodus. As Israel set out from Egypt they followed God as He led them with the pillar of cloud and pillar of fire. Then, Deuteronomy 13:4 tells us "You shall follow the LORD your God and fear Him; and you shall keep His commandments, listen to His voice, serve Him, and cling to Him." Let's go back to God's instructions to Joshua again,

"...be careful to do according to all the law which Moses My servant commanded you; do not turn from it to the right or to the left, so that you may have success wherever you go." (Joshua 1:7)

Later, as Joshua announced the division of the land by tribes, he reminded the people of some history of the time he and the other spies checked out their new land, and underscored the importance of following God step by step, of following God fully.

"... my brethren who went up with me made the heart of the people melt with fear; but I followed the LORD my God fully. So Moses swore on that day, saying, 'Surely the land on which your foot has trodden will be an inheritance to you and to your children forever, because you have followed the LORD my God fully.'" (Joshua 14:8-9)

We are to follow God step by step for the entire journey. Does that make all your problems, questions and difficult choices vanish? No. Does that mean you will instantly and easily know what God's will for you is in any and every given moment? No. But, and listen carefully, those are not the biggest questions before you, as much as you may think they are. The biggest questions are "Am I continually learning more about God, His truth and myself from the Bible?" And, "Am I remembering and living the truth I have learned?"

God is never going to drop a blueprint down from heaven for the details of the rest of your life. He is not concerned about you knowing what is up ahead tomorrow or the next day, week or year. He is concerned about you listening to Him, and letting Him lead you by His truth in the Scriptures and by the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

Conclusion.

"Free At Last!" We are free! We live in God's freedom as we remember and live in our deliverance by God, our devotion to God, and our direction from God. There's a song that begins,

"So long I had searched for life's meaning, enslaved by the world and my greed. Then the door of my prison was opened by love, for the ransom was paid, I was freed."

The second verse continues,

"I'm free from the guilt that I carried, from the dull empty life I'm set free. For when I met Jesus He made me complete, He forgot the foolish man I used to be."

And the chorus,

“I’m free from the fear of tomorrow, I’m free from the guilt of the past,
for I’ve traded my shackles for a glorious song. I’m free, praise the Lord
free at last.”⁶

As you enter the next moments of quietness and reflection, make sure you are one of God’s freed people, that Jesus Christ is your Savior. If you have questions about this, talk with me today. For everyone of us who knows we have been set free by Jesus Christ, affirm again that “It was for freedom that Christ set [you] free.” And so, then affirm to “keep standing firm and ... not be subject again to a yoke of slavery” (Galatians 5:1). And finally, thank God for freeing, saving you as His gift of grace through Jesus.

¹ King, Martin Luther, Jr. *I Have A Dream*. Copyright: Estate of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Atlanta, Georgia.

² *Free At Last*. Public Domain. At:
http://www.negrospirituals.com/news-song/free_at_last_from.htm

³ Op. cit.

⁴ Grossman, Cathy Lynn. *Most religious groups in USA have lost ground, survey finds. USA Today*. March 17, 2009. <http://www.usatoday.com/news/religion/2009-03-09-american-religion-ARIS_N.htm>.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Gaither, Gloria and William J. Gaither. *I’m Free*. © 1968 William J. Gaither, Inc.

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