

Freedom From: Stiff Necks and Long Obedience

LaGrave Avenue Christian Reformed Church

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Exodus 32:1-14

Over the last two weeks in our ‘Freedom From’ series, we heard how God gave Israel freedom from their slavery in Egypt. God shows his power over Pharaoh and the gods of Egypt. In the first 14 chapters of exodus, Pharaoh - the Lord of Death - is the oppressor of Israel. But in chapter 14 Pharaoh and his chariots end up at the bottom of the sea! Israel sings and dances at the far end of the Red Sea as they celebrate the death of their enemy. At that point in the story there’s a bit of you that might say, “Well that’s it! Ding dong the witch is dead, the wicked witch is dead! Israel has her freedom! Her enemy is gone, the slavery is over, and now she’s free! Now they will live happily ever after!” If only it were that simple. Unfortunately, there’s another force that holds Israel captive. There’s another force that keeps her in chains. What evil force is this? Let’s jump ahead in the story and see. In Exodus 32, we are much further along in the story. God has shown his glory on Mount Sinai. God has given his people his commandments and laws. And, most recently, God has revealed his plans to come and live with them in the tabernacle. You might say that chapters 25-31 are like wedding plans. God is about to come and live among Israel in a long-term relationship of love. Chapters 25-31 are the wedding preparations: Israel and God are building a house (the tabernacle), they’re getting the furniture ready for the house (the tabernacle furnishings), and they are planning the ceremonies for their union (the feasts and offerings). As chapter 32 opens the wedding planning is almost done. Moses is on Mount Sinai making the final preparations for the union. Here’s what happens.

Read Exodus 32:1-14. What a mess. How could Israel do this!? After all the Lord has done for her?! Right on the edge of their wedding day. Think how this must look from God’s perspective. This is not the first time Israel has done something like this. God started this relationship with humankind way back in Genesis. He entered into a loving relationship with humanity, his bride. He built her a garden filled with lush and beautiful places, and together they would walk that garden in the cool of the day. But one day a snake came along and whispered a few flatteries in humanity’s ear and she cheated on him. Misery descends on the garden. But The Lord does not give up in his bride! He sticks with her. Almost immediately he makes plans to repair the damage so that the two of them could be together again. It takes a long time. Lately, she’d got herself into an abusive relationship with an Egyptian guy, but he found her and got her out of there. She was in bad shape, but He cleaned her up and clothed her. “I love you! I’m here for you,” he told her over and over again. Now they’re ready to renew their vows. He’s going to move in with her, right into her midst. But just a couple of weeks before the wedding, while he’s out finalizing a few things for the ceremony, she goes on a bender. She throws a wild bachelorette party, some handsome young bull shows up and she throws herself at him. The Lord comes home and finds the two of them in a drunken embrace. He’s furious. ‘Unbelievable! She did it again! Are these people completely incapable of faithfulness?!’ What’s the force holding Israel captive in this story? It’s herself. You can rescue Israel from captivity in Egypt, but who will rescue her from herself. We can be rescued from every enemy and every oppressor out there, but who will save us from our unfaithful hearts? Until Israel’s heart is changed, until our heart is changed, we will not be free.

Where does Israel’s heart go wrong? What exactly happens inside her that trips her up? There’s so much in this story that can shed light on the weakness of the human heart, but this

morning I want to look at just two broken things inside Israel and inside of us that hold us captive. First, notice how Israel's sin comes out of nowhere. Leading up to chapter 32, there is nothing to prepare us for this incident. If you read the last 12 chapters of Exodus, everything seems to be going so well. The law is given, the people are getting ready to build the tabernacle, there's not even a whiff of trouble, and then: wham!! full scale rebellion. Israel has been sober for months and then, without warning, they go on a bender. This is so true to how sin shows up in our own life. Some of our worst sins are not planned; they just erupt out of nowhere. The husband cheats on his wife, gets caught, and what does he say to his wife, "It just happened! I don't know what came over me! It just happened!" The high school girl has had a hard day and she's feeling irritable. A really cheerful and talkative friend sits down at the lunch table and starts talking all bouncy and bubbly. All of a sudden, she blurts out, "Would you PLEASE stop talking! We're all sick of your blah blah blah!" She wounds her friend. She didn't plan on saying it, it just came out! It just happened. Later in chapter 32 Moses confronts Aaron about the golden calves. He wants to know how this all happened. Do you remember Aaron's response? "Hey man! Don't get angry! You know how these people are prone to sin! They wanted some zip in their religious experience, so I took their jewelry, threw it in the fire, and out came this calf!" It just happened. Some of the worst most destructive things we do are not planned, they just erupt out of us. Why is that? It's yet more evidence of our sinful nature. Or, to put it in Calvinist terms, it's yet more evidence of total depravity. We human beings do many wonderful things. We are beautiful creatures made in the image of God, capable of great acts of love and compassion and creativity and kindness, but there's a dark place in every single one of us. It's deep within us, and no matter how hard we try we can't uproot it, we can't wash it clean. So we try to hold it down, like a person might hold a basketball under water. We push it down under the water so others don't see it. We know it's there, but others can only see our sweet smile and our good manners. But then all of a sudden, without warning, the basketball shoots up and the darkness is right there for everyone to see.

The other thing inside of Israel that gets her into trouble is impatience. What pushes Israel to make the golden calf? They're tired of waiting for Moses. "When we were freed from Egypt, we wanted our promised land, happy ever after life to start now! We didn't expect all this wilderness, and this travel. We didn't expect a desert journey. And now, Moses is up on the mountain doing who knows what. I am so sick of waiting. Let's have a party! We may not be able to get to the Promised Land today, but let's make ourselves a little Promised Land right here, right now." They're impatient. They want a short cut.

God's way is not the way of the short cut. The way of the Lord is the long and slow way. That's always been true. "Abraham, leave your home and I will bless you and give you children and a land of your own." Does that happen right away? Hardly. Abraham and Sarah wander for 25 years before they have a child. The long slow way. "I will bring you to the promised land," says the Lord. Does that happen right away? Hardly. More than 40 years of wilderness wandering. More than 40 years of heat and dust. More than 40 years of the same food day after day after day after day. The long, slow way. And what about us. Scripture tells us, "If anyone is in Christ that person is a new creation! The old has gone the new is come!" Does that happen right away? No. It begins right away, but the journey to the new creation is a lifetime of dying to the old self and rising to the new self. It's a lifetime of picking up your cross daily and following Jesus. The long, slow way. Following our God has always been a long obedience in the same direction (to use Eugene Peterson's phrase), and we struggle with that. We want our happiness and we want it NOW.

Just think about how many of our self-destructive sins start because we're impatient and we want a short cut. The college freshman realizes how hard it is to cultivate the kind of emotional intimacy necessary for healthy sexuality, so she jumps to the one-night stand. Instant results, long-term misery. The frustrated high school athlete is tired of waiting for his body to grow, tired of the work it takes to get stronger, googles Human Growth Hormone and puts in an order. Instant results, long-term misery. The tired parent realizes how much patience and sacrifice it takes to raise a willful child in the way of disciplined love, but when you yell, pinch their arm and give them a good shake...instant results! Instant results, but long-term misery. 'Forget this long obedience. Forget Moses and his wilderness journey, we want some gods who will bring us to the Promised Land today.' Put this impatient streak together with that dark stain on our hearts and you have the truth of us. We are beautiful creatures, made in the image of God, capable of extraordinary things, but we are broken. We are serial cheaters. O what a wretched people we are, who will rescue us from this body of death? Who will free us from this captivity?

Earlier in this sermon I used the analogy of a twice-jilted fiancé to describe God's perspective on his relationship with humanity. What would you do if you were in that position? If your fiancé cheated on you not once, but twice, the second time after you had done all this work to rebuild the relationship, would you take him (or her) back? No way, right? You'd end it. If your child had a fiancé do that to them, you'd tell them to end it. You would be angry at them if they went back. What does the Lord do with his people? What does the Lord do with us? He's pretty angry with Israel, no question. He blows up at them. He's so angry at them, he even threatens to get rid of them and start over. And Israel does pay a price for her infidelity. At the end of the chapter 3000 people die. But somehow, mercifully, foolishly, wonderfully, he takes these people back. He sticks with them. He sticks with us. Why? Why does God stick with us? Why does God stick with a group of people with a track record of infidelity? Why does God stick with us when we are so obviously going to break his heart? In the context of the story the answer to that story is in verse 13. Because he promised. He swore by himself to stick with Abraham's family no matter what. If this relationship with God depends on the quality of our hearts and the steadfastness of our obedience, this relationship is doomed. We are stiff-necked people. But thanks be to God, the future of this relationship depends of the quality of his heart, and the steadfastness of his faithfulness. How strong is His heart? How great is his faithfulness? You get a hint of that later in the passage. Moses offers to take the fall for the people. Verse 32: Moses says to God, "please forgive their sin, and if you can't, blot me out of the book of life instead." God says no. He's not going to do that. Because ultimately He has a different plan. He's going to give that job to his one and only Son. Jesus will pay the price for our unfaithfulness. In the regular world, what's the price for marital unfaithfulness? Infidelity usually brings shame, isolation and humiliation. On the cross, Jesus that's exactly what Jesus endures. Jesus suffers, isolation and humiliation as if he were the one who cheated, as if he were the homewrecker who made a mess of the place...when it was us all along.

What do we do with our unfaithful hearts? What do we do with the broken place inside us that holds us captive? We bring our hearts to Jesus. We do it at the beginning of the day, we do it at the end of every day, and we do it a hundred times in between. And Jesus takes hold of those hearts and he washes them and he pours out his Spirit on them, until, little by little our hearts change. Bit by bit, over the long slow journey of our life, the hold of sin is broken and we are no longer prisoners of darkness; now we are children of the light. Oh what wretched people we are. Who will rescue us from this body of death? Thanks be to God he gives us the victory through Jesus Christ our Lord.