

Freedom From: The Fleshpots of Egypt

LaGrave Avenue Christian Reformed Church

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Exodus 15:22-25a, 16:2-4, 17:1-7

I'd like to start out with a question, and I realize that this might sound like a hard, abstract question, but it's not meant to be. In fact this is a very practical question. It's great question for our Freedom From, Freedom To sermon series because and how you answer it will have a huge impact on how free you are. Here's the question: What is your relationship to the past? It's an important question because your relationship with your yesterdays will have a lot to say about how free you are today. Let's keep this question in mind during our reading. I will read parts of three consecutive stories in Exodus. These three stories come right after God's spectacular deliverance at the Red Sea. Israel has just seen the Lord's deliverance, and they've just finished celebrating that deliverance. Here's what happens. And as I read see if you can discern how Israel relates to her past. Read Exodus 15:22-25, 16:2-4, 17:1-7.

So how does Israel relate to her past? I would say that in this stage of her journey, Israel is not free from her past. I would say that on this stage of the journey Israel is in captivity to her past. Not only is Israel captive, she wants to return to her past. *"Why did you bring us up out of Egypt to make us and our livestock and our children die of thirst? Back in Egypt we sat around pots of meat and ate all the food we wanted, but you have brought us out in to this desert to starve!"* The Israelites remember Egypt and they say, *"SIGH... Weren't those times great. If only we could be back there again eating out of those meat pots."* The question must be asked: "Have these people absolutely lost their minds!?" Egypt?! Egypt! You want to go back to Egypt where you were slaves, where your firstborn male children were thrown into the Nile, where your labor was so bad that you cried out to the Lord for deliverance! You are nostalgic for Egypt?!

Nostalgia. That's the word for the relationship that Israel has to her past. Israel is captive to a spiritually destructive nostalgia. I want to talk about nostalgia today because it can hold us captive too. What is nostalgia? And how can it be destructive? Let me be clear from the start: I don't think that all nostalgia is destructive. There's nothing wrong with looking at old pictures with a friend and saying, 'Remember how much fun that was!' But this story shows us that nostalgia can become spiritually destructive. Let me try a definition here. Nostalgia becomes toxic when your dissatisfaction with your present and your fear for the future makes you want to go backwards into a romanticized past. Toxic nostalgia is when your dissatisfaction with your present and your fear for the future makes you want to go backwards into a romanticized past.

Why is it bad to want to go back? Because the Christian life is a forward moving thing. Our lives are not meant to stand still, and they are certainly not meant to move backwards. Biblical faith always has a forward lean. *"Seek first the Kingdom of God and his righteousness,"* says Jesus, *"Search it out. Move toward it."* *"Pick up your cross daily and follow me!"* Says Jesus. This isn't a sitting at home with your talent buried in the ground, it's following. *"Run with perseverance the race marked out for you!"* says the preacher of Hebrews, *"setting your eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of your faith."* And then, maybe most directly of all, here's Paul's description of his own pilgrimage In Philippians 3: *"I have not arrived at my goal, but one thing I do: forgetting what is behind, and straining on toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal."* Biblical faith has a forward lean. Whether you are 9 or 90, the life of a

believer moves toward a goal. Spiritually healthy believers are always moving away from our old selves, and towards our new life in Jesus.

In this passage, Israel has lost her forward motion, and she's slipped into a toxic nostalgia. How exactly did this happen? Let's drill down into the passage because it will show us how a bad nostalgia takes root in Israel and in us. We'll see that toxic nostalgia has two central features. First, toxic nostalgia happens when you are overwhelmed by the wilderness. Nostalgia attaches itself to narratives of decline. Nostalgia grows when things are bad and you think they are getting worse. That certainly fits Israel's situation. She is dissatisfied with her present circumstances: Israel is in the wilderness. She's watching her children suffer. Fear for your future – Israel sees things getting worse. *'Our children and our livestock are going to die!'* The wilderness is fertile ground for toxic nostalgia. It can take over when we are constantly telling each other a narrative of decline.

This is why older people are more prone to toxic nostalgia. Some spiritual afflictions are more likely to trip up the young, but it's us older folk who are more likely to fall victim to nostalgia because we are ... sorry to say it ... in decline. When you hit a certain age – let's say 45 – it becomes impossible to deny the diminishments of age. Your eyes start to go, and so, quietly, very quietly, you buy a pair of reading glasses. Your knees start to go and you give up your weekly basketball game. The ache in your back and the ringing of your ears loudly proclaim the decline of your body. It's all downhill from here. In the middle of that decline, we middle aged and older folk get nostalgic. The middle-aged man feels his decline. His mind goes back wistfully to those days when his hair was thicker and his stomach flatter. And so he does something to try to go back in time. Maybe it's innocent nostalgia. He grows a groovy pony tail. He buys the vintage Camaro. He takes his kids on long misty-eyed tours of his childhood places "Kids! Kids! Look this is where I used to go to school! Let's go in!" That's relatively innocent nostalgia.

But sometimes the nostalgia takes a darker turn. Maybe he starts acting like a frat boy, gets a pair of leather pants, and has an affair. He's trying to go back to Egypt. Or, more common still, toxic nostalgia can take the form we see in this passage: a lot of grumbling. In our season of decline, we can enter a perpetual grouchiness about the state of the world. "The church is declining. My children are making terrible choices. The country is going to pot. I want to go back to Egypt." Sometimes toxic nostalgia attaches itself to grief. That's a hard one. It's really dangerous to make moral judgments about other people's grief so I want to be really careful here. But when you lose a really important person in your life, it's easy for you to feel like the future is hopeless; it's easy to fall into a pattern where grief keeps sending your mind back and back and back, and your life loses its forward lean.

Ultimately all these examples point to the second feature of bad nostalgia: Bad nostalgia forgets God's role in your story. Bad nostalgia forgets who's Lord of history and who's Lord of your life. That's so clearly what happens to Israel in Exodus 17. It's summed up in that question in verse 7: *"Is the Lord among us or not?"* The Israelites act like the answer to that question is "no." Israel has forgotten that God was Lord of their past. Notice the phrasing of verse 3: *"Moses why did YOU bring us up out of Egypt!"* Wait, what?! Moses didn't bring the people out of Egypt. The Lord did that. *"I am the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt!"* It's like they've forgotten the Red Sea and the plagues and all mighty things God did to set them free. All they remember are the pots of meat. They take God out of the story of their past. Israel also forgets that God is the Lord of their future. *"Moses, you lead us out of Egypt to die in the desert!"* To die in the desert?! How can you think the reason God brought you out of

Egypt was to die in the desert?! God freed you so that He could bring you to a good land flowing with milk and honey! God has promised to make you fruitful and multiply! Yes, things are hard right now, but he has utterly secured your future by the power of His promise! *“Is the Lord among us or not?”* The Israelites have forgotten that they are a part of God’s salvation story. When you are in the grip of toxic nostalgia you forget his faithfulness in the past and his promises for tomorrow.

This happens to us all the time. This toxic nostalgia descended on me this week, if you will allow me to be personal. I was in the middle of a busy week. I had extra stuff that took up my whole Monday, I had both sermons today, and there were all sorts of other things on my agenda. I was feeling pinched and anxious. And then, in the middle of my week, a big commitment came up that I didn’t see coming. I had to stop my sermon preparation for this sermon and I had to get in my car to attend to this unexpected task. And as I drove to this meeting, my spirit was grumbling. ‘I can’t do all this! This is going to kill me! I want to go back to July when there were no meetings and I had a week of vacation!’ I was grumbling like an Israelite. All of a sudden I realized that this question in verse 7 was for me: *“Is the Lord among us or not?”* That was for me. I’d forgotten the message of the Bible text I was working on just 20 minutes before! I was just like Israel!! I’d forgotten the big story of my life. I belong to Jesus. Jesus had done great things for me in the past. I’ve had a hundred stressful weeks in my past, and every single time he has brought me through. As surely as he brought Israel through the Red Sea. Jesus has promised great things for my future. He’s said that he will be with me no matter what. He’s promised that there is nothing in all creation that can separate me from his hand. Not life or death, not success or failure. God was so serious about this commitment that Jesus gave his life to secure it. I won’t say that it ended my stress, it didn’t. But it was at least enough for me to turn my eyes away from nostalgia and self-pity, and to run with perseverance the race marked out for me that day.

A lot of you are facing things infinitely more terrifying than a busy week. But the spiritual dynamics are the same. And the remedy is the same. You remember the Lord of your story. God has given you great faithfulness in your past. God has given you unshakeable promises for your future. Now we can run the race marked out for us, and if we can’t run, we walk, and if we can’t walk we can at least lean.

Today is not a wilderness day for LaGrave; it is a mountaintop day. We have nine baptisms in one day. Nine baptisms!!! It’s a record for me and it may be a record for this church. How wonderful! We need days like this where God’s faithfulness is right in front of our eyes. I hope we will always remember this day and how it was filled with God’s faithfulness. But the days ahead will not all be mountaintop days. There will be lots of days in the wilderness. You parents will have sleepless nights. There will be days where these sweet little children will give you so much grief you will wonder if your heart can bear it. Our church community may have harder times. We have 9 baptisms today; the day may come when we say, “Wow it’s been a long time since a child has been born in our congregation!” On those wilderness days, may we all remember what it felt like on the mountaintop. May we remember how we sang ‘Great is Thy Faithfulness’ and how God’s promises were right there in front of our eyes. May we remember the promises that were poured out at that baptismal font, unshakeable promises for our future. May that give us the strength to run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith.