

So we're going to look at Scripture together in a moment or two, but before we do that let me just bring a little introduction because this is the last Sunday in our preaching series looking at the life of Moses and the history of the Israelites, and then using passages from the Romans to reflect on their situation. So this is the final opportunity that we are going to just be taking this last stage in Moses' life and where that was in the history of the Israelites, and then looking at Romans to reflect upon it.

So at this point in the story, Moses and the Israelites are free but as an old saying goes it only took one night to get the Israelites out of Egypt, but it took 40 years to get Egypt out of the Israelites. I think this saying is making the point that the physical liberation of the people was far easier than their emotional and spiritual liberation. So, following the events of Passover and that initial Exodus journey out of Egypt there are a number of incidents that follow that (that we find in Exodus chapters 15, 16 and 17) and in each of these incidents the Israelites complain to Moses about various things: the water was too bitter; we don't have enough food or water, they said. Each time Moses cried out to the lord and the Lord provided for their needs: he turned the bitter water sweet; he gave the people manna and quail to eat, and he caused water to Spring out of a rock to quench the people's thirst. But the central point here seems to be the difference between the mindset of slaves and the mindset of free people. When the Israelites were slaves in Egypt they could blame their horrendous circumstances on their cruel masters – this is who they can blame for the situation that they're in. But now as free men and women they must take some responsibility for the way that things are. They must also decide whether to trust God, who has been faithful to them in the past, whether to trust him now even when they do not see how he can bring them through their present troubles.

I'm now going to read a final passage from Paul's letter to the Romans which should help us to think through how these issues I've mentioned apply to us. The reading is from Romans Chapter 6 verses 15 to 23, and in my Bible this passage is headed: "Slaves to righteousness"

[Reading Romans 6:15-23] Amen.

So in this reading Paul talks about what journeying towards true freedom looks like. He does this by presenting us with some stark contrasts that I want to take a few moments to highlight for us.

Firstly, Paul contrasts freedom with licence, in verse 15. The dictionary defines "licence" as the freedom to behave as one wishes. I think Paul's expressing this idea when he says (in verse 15): "...Shall we sin all the more because we are not under Law but under Grace?" He's referring there to licence: shall we just do what we like? Now licence may sound like the opportunity for us to be completely in control of what we do. But there is always the lurking question: who is in control of whom? I was re-reading this week a story that I read years ago and it's a story about the traditional way that an Eskimo hunter used to kill a wolf. And the story goes like this:

Firstly, the Eskimo would coat his knife blade with animal blood and then allow it to freeze. He would then add layer after layer of blood until the blade was completely concealed by the frozen blood. Next the hunter would fix his knife into the frozen ground with the blade pointing upwards. Now wolves have an acute sense of smell and one of them would quickly pick up the scent of blood, discover the blade and then would lick it and taste the fresh frozen blood. The wolf would then begin to lick faster, more and more vigorously

lapping the blade until the keen edge of the blade was bare. Then feverishly, the wolf would lick the blade in the cold arctic nights. The craving for blood would become so great that the wolf would not notice the razor sharp stinging of the naked blade on their own tongue; nor would they recognise the instant when that insatiable thirst was being satisfied by their own warm blood. Their carnivorous appetite would continue to crave more blood until in the morning light the wolf would be found dead on the snow.

That is the danger with licence – do we control it or does it control us? Paul contrasts licence with true freedom, which I think he understands to be the ability to choose to live out our God-given identity. I wonder whether you have ever asked yourself the question; can God sin? I believe the answer to this question is no! Because the way that God behaves is defined by his nature. Now someone might say in response: God is God and in his sovereign power can sin if he chooses to; but for me the overarching characteristic of God is Love, and God constantly chooses to behave in loving, generous, sacrificial ways towards us and all his creation. And we, each, are made in the image of God. So God's invitation to us is to discover the freedom to live out that image of God, as it is uniquely expressed in each one of us.

Secondly, Paul draws the contrast between being slaves to sin or slaves to righteousness. In verses 16 to 18 he is making it clear that we all serve someone or something, whether we recognise that fact or not; and these two masters make vastly different demands on their respective slaves, and they give hugely different rewards. We could describe sinful living as choosing to live an entirely self-centred life, and Paul says in verse 16 that the rewards for living this way is spiritual death; in other words separation from God – that is the reward for living in this way. On the other hand choosing to live out our God-given identity which Paul describes as being a slave to righteousness, or serving righteousness, leads to a life united in love with God.

Thirdly, Paul is contrasting the road of sin with the road of righteousness (in verses 19 to 22). In fact he is showing what the ultimate destination of these two roads will be. On the one hand sinfulness leads to a sense of shame which will in the end lead to spiritual death; but for me this destination is more about wasted potential, about a person not fulfilling their God-given identity than anything else. In the 19th century the publishers Harper and Row had a horse called Dobbin who they use to power their printing press. Dobbin was tied to a pole and then walk round and round the pole, which he did for most of his life, and thereby powered their printing press. In his old age, it was decided that Dobbin had earned his freedom. So he was uncoupled from the machine and taken out to some countryside and was let loose in a field which contained lush grass and had top quality horse feed in a big trough. However the poor animal just stood in the field without eating or moving and started to rapidly decline in health. In a rush of sentiment, and, perhaps, guilt, the board of the publishing house met to decide what to do with the ailing horse; then someone had the bright idea that a pole should be erected in the field and that Dobbin should be tied to it. As soon as this was done Dobbin perked up because he now knew what to do! He spent the rest of his days walking around the pole in that field, and he would only eat as he walked around and round because that's what his life had become. Well, unlike Dobbin in his field the road of righteousness is intended to enable us to fulfil our God-given potential and purpose. And we don't want to be the human equivalent of Dobbin just going round and round in circles not fulfilling our potential, and purpose that God has for us.

Fourthly, Paul shows a contrast between receiving wages and receiving a gift (in verse 23). He says that slavery to sin receives the wage that it deserves, which is, as we said, spiritual death. But being a slave to righteousness receives the gracious and generous, not wage but, a free gift. None

of us can earn this gift because we cannot achieve moral purity, but we can receive it as a free and undeserved gift of love from God. And those last word there, that actually if we choose to live enslaved to sin, actually the wages we receive are that which we earn in a sense; that's our wage if we choose to live enslaved to selfishness. But the other side being that if we choose to serve righteousness then we receive not the wages we deserve but rather the free gift of God, to each one of us: his love, his acceptance, his renewal. And we can live in that relationship with God that is what is designed for us - God designed us to be in relationship with him. There is as lovely quote I once heard, it said: "There is a God-shaped hole in each of our lives." And we will never be able to fill that void in our life, other than with God because we were designed for God to fulfil that place in our lives. Amen.