

“How Do You Leave a Bad Place?”

Exodus 12:1-14

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How do you leave a bad place or situation? Where do you find the confidence and courage you need? How do you handle the emotions that overwhelm you? I think these questions emerge from this text and need to be addressed this morning.

The children of Israel were in a bad place. This place that had been good to them for many generations no longer was and something needed to be done.

Four hundred years prior to our text, Jacob's descendants migrated to Egypt during a famine. They were welcomed with open arms by Pharaoh because of his association with Jacob's son, Joseph. He was one of Pharaoh's most trusted advisors and administrators.

As time passed and the number of Jacob's descendants expanded, the Egyptian leaders became concerned. They feared a revolt or takeover. As a result, the Israelites were forced to become slaves and perform difficult manual labor. The demands placed upon them were unreasonable and exhausting.

You recall that the straw that broke the camel's back was actually straw. The Israelites' workload was increased when Pharaoh instructed his foremen that they were no longer to supply the straw needed for making bricks. The Israelites were to secure their own straw while at the same time making the same number of bricks each day. If they did not meet their quota, they were beaten.

Moses knew it was time for his people to leave Egypt and appealed to God for help. God heard his request and responded. He promised to help the Israelites leave Egypt and begin a new life. The journey would not be an easy one and it would require a lot of courage, determination and cooperation. Moses understood and agreed to lead what we now refer to as the Exodus.

Our text outlines Moses' words to his people as they prepared to leave Egypt. These were practical, yet urgent words filled with faith and hope. No doubt they provided guidance and inspiration for the difficult journey ahead.

I am intrigued by this concept of liberation and am led to ask. **Are you in a bad place today?** Are you in an abusive relationship or struggling with a crippling addiction to drugs, alcohol, food, pornography, ego or possessions? Are you running with the wrong crowd and headed into some dangerous places? Are you in bondage to a faulty way of thinking that is contributing to low self-esteem, inferiority or depression? Are you in an unhealthy religious environment that does not lift you up but tears you down? Are you experiencing burnout on your job or are you trapped in the prison of poverty?

Must you stay where you are forever? Is change possible, and if so, how can you head in a new direction? I believe our text speaks to this and emphatically tells us that we do not have to stay in a bad place. Change, even radical change, is possible.

How do you do it? Where do you start? What challenges will you face? Let me share some ideas found in our text.

The first step you must take is to acknowledge that you have a problem. Quit living in denial. Don't talk yourself out of needing to make changes. Perhaps there was a time when the Israelites did, but no longer.

I have a counselor friend that has coined the phrase, "Camera Check." Whenever he is talking to a client that is in denial, he asks them to take a picture of his or her situation to see what they are overlooking. "What is before a camera when you snap a picture is what will be captured on film or on the disc. Many times when you look at a picture, you see things you did not realize were there. It is the same in life. A 'Camera Check' forces people to deal with reality and confront brutal facts." He finds this to be an effective way to help clients move beyond denial.

Are you living in denial? If you took a picture of your situation today, what would it reveal that you refuse to acknowledge? Are you ready to be honest?

Gloria White is my friend and one of the counselors that has an office at our church. In her book, The Path of Grace, she writes about the cycles of life identified by three biblical categories: bondage, wilderness and Promise Land; release, recovery and liberty; death, burial and resurrection. She clearly explains the characteristics of each cycle, offers keen insights about them and offers suggestions for the journey toward wholeness.

Related to our text today, Gloria has told me that everyone is in one of three places in his or her life. "They are either in bondage, transition or the Promise Land. Wise are the people that recognize where they are and are on a journey toward health and wholeness."

Where are you this morning? Are you in bondage and will you admit it? Are you in the wilderness learning how to think and live differently? Are you in the Promise land where you have discovered how to live one day at a time relying upon God and others to help you live responsibly?

The first step you must take to head in a new direction is to identify where you are. The Israelites had to confront the fact that they were in an unhealthy and dangerous place. Will you do that this morning?

To leave a place of bondage, you will need help. If you could have done it by yourself, you already would have.

Leaving your Egypt will not be easy. It wasn't for the Israelites and it will not be for you. They needed God, each other and their leaders. They never could have left Egypt without divine and human help.

Like the Israelites, you will need traveling companions along your journey to liberation. You will battle despair, cynicism, fear, uncertainty and hopelessness. You will need others to provide encouragement and support. This is one journey that you cannot make alone. You need family, friends and faith. If the Israelites did, what makes you think you will not?

You will also need a plan in order to leave your Egypt. Isn't this what Moses provided them? He was quite specific, wasn't he? He gave them the first steps they needed to take in order to leave. Why did he do this? I think he was not only giving them directions, but instilling confidence in them.

This challenge was daunting. Mobilizing over one million people to leave Egypt was an enormous task. Was it really possible? I'm sure there were many skeptics, but perhaps they were won over when Moses gave them their instructions. They could do what he was asking outlined in our text, and when they did, it had to be a huge confidence builder. If they could take the first step, they could take the next one.

"How do you eat an elephant?" the old joke asks, "one bite at a time."

When leaving a bad situation, focus upon first steps. Take them and others will follow. Don't become paralyzed by the magnitude of the challenge. Start where you are and keep progressing.

I believe our text reveals that you need one other thing in order to leave bondage, and that is a good memory. You may find this a bit surprising, but let me explain.

Listen to Moses' final instructions to his people. "This day shall be a day of remembrance for you. You shall celebrate it as a festival to the Lord. Throughout your generations you shall observe it as a perpetual ordinance" Exodus 12:14.

Why was Moses adamant about them remembering this journey of faith? He knew they would be tempted to return to Egypt when they faced intimidating challenges and hurdles on their journey to pursue a new life. They would forget how hard life was and how miserable they were. A poor memory would doom them to repeat history. It will us, too.

Let me return to Gloria's book, The Path of Grace. In it, Gloria states that once a person reaches the Promise Land, there is no guarantee that he or she will stay there. Many people go back into bondage and begin the cycle over because they don't stay alert to where they are in relation to God and others. They grow overconfident and quit relying upon God. They grow complacent and quit listening to others. They grow rebellious and make irresponsible decisions.

This alarmed me. How sad it is to see someone move from liberation back to bondage. I think I understand the reason for Moses' advice to his people in the last part of our text.

Perhaps there was another reason, though, Moses instructed his fellow pilgrims to remember this night forever. It was his way of inviting succeeding generations to join God as a partner in liberation. Just as they needed help to be released from bondage, so would others along their journey and they would need to offer that help out of humility and gratitude.

Do you need help today? Are you in an unhealthy and dangerous place? Are you in an abusive relationship, struggling with an addiction, running with the wrong crowd, harboring destructive thoughts or settling for less than your best? Do you need to make some dramatic changes? What is the biggest challenge you face when you think about starting a new life? Who can help you overcome these obstacles?

Do you need faith, family and friends to accompany you on this journey? I know where you can find them. As a friend recently wrote, "We worship a God that liberates from bondage, anytime, any kind, any place, and then he invites us to a partnership in that liberating work." Join us this morning in that partnership with Him and one another.