



the heart of God

JUSTICE FROM GENESIS TO REVELATION

PART FOUR
**God's Justice and
Human Freedom**
EXODUS 15





Part Four – God's Justice and Human Freedom

By Pastor Ricky Stephen

1. Freedom and Tyranny

Webster's defines freedom in a very modern sense:

Freedom is:

- a. the absence of necessity, coercion, or constraint in choice or action
- b. liberation from slavery or restraint or from the power of another : independence

And the Exodus shows us that this is at least a partially correct definition of freedom, because it shows that:

God wants to set us free *from* tyranny.

Exodus is the primary revelation of who God is in the Old Testament and, according to Exodus 15, it reveals God as a warrior who fights for justice.

The Liberation theologians of South America challenge the theological perspectives of much of the northern hemisphere, saying we have been too a-political. And they do it using the Exodus. Father of Liberation Theology, Peruvian Gustavo Guterrez, once wrote:

“The God of Exodus is the God of history and of political liberation more than he is the God of nature.”

For some of us, we need the reminder that God cares about those who are in slavery today, as well. He cares about those caught in the crossfire in warfare.

God wants to set us free *from* tyranny.

2. Freedom and Autonomy

Freedom is not autonomy—not just freedom *from*; it is freedom for a life-giving relationship with the one true God.

Tim Keller asks the question,^[1] who is freer:

The one who eats as many doughnuts as they want?

Or the one who eats healthily?

Modern justice can't comment on that question, because we are supposed to have the right to pursue our own vision of happiness. Justice today focuses on protecting the rights of the individual more than on what is morally right.

Ancient justice systems could comment because they had a shared vision of what is good. If people have an obligation to their country and kin, to serve and protect, it is better to be healthy and strong. So, eat healthily.



[1] Tim Keller, *The Reason for God: Conversations on Faith and Life Discussion Guide*, pg. 44.

Moderns say, my rights go first. I have ‘autonomy’, I get to define what is good for me.

Ancients say what ‘is right’ goes first, the good life. Your freedom is the freedom to live according to just limitations.

In the Exodus you could compare doughnuts with Pharoah and eating healthy with Mt. Sinai.

Pharoah is a bully, and bullies thrive when people can’t organize and protect themselves. Tyranny rises up when anarchy reigns, we see this in history.[2]

Pharoah, like many things in Exodus, is also reminiscent of a character in Genesis. In Genesis, the first humans sin by seeking a life without restrictions, going their own way. They are tempted by a snake. In classical depictions, Pharoah’s crown has a snake on it. It may be for this reason why Moses’ first battle with the Egyptian magicians is a fight between God’s ‘snake’ and the snakes of Egypt.

When we embrace a life without limits, it goes bad for us.

The other option is Mt. Sinai. Eating Healthy. The right restrictions.

Mt. Sinai is not about limiting freedom, it’s about enhancing it. As God says at the start of the Ten Commandments:

2 “I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery.

Biblical justice is not just about doing what is ‘right’, it’s about relating properly to the God who wants our ultimate freedom. Mt. Sinai is not a courtroom, it’s a wedding altar.

Because, as Tim Keller put it:

“Freedom is not the absence of restrictions, it is the presence of the right restrictions.”[3]

If our selfish desire destroys us, service to the one true God enlivens us. It’s why Jesus says:

For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will find it.
(Matthew 16:25)

Freedom is not autonomy—not just freedom *from*; it is freedom *for* a life-giving relationship with the one true God.

3. Freedom and Equality

The Biblical understanding of freedom is that any freedom I have is for the good of the other.

Issues of equality are the hot topic today, and rightly so. There are many in our world who cannot get ahead or succeed, not because they lack the skill or determination, but because of where they were born and who they were born to.

We are all probably familiar with the different economic and political strategies to try to quell inequality. But the Bible seems to teach we should expect it, but not accept it.

[3] Tim Keller, *The Reason for God: Conversations on Faith and Life Discussion Guide*, pg. 44.



[2] See Ian McGilchrist’s *The Master and His Emissary*

Jesus doesn't teach that life is fair. He promises the poor will always be with us (Matt. 26:11). The Parable of the Talents (Matt. 25:14-30) shows that God doesn't give people an equal amount of 'talents', rather, each 'according to their own ability' (v15).

Cormac McCarthy has one of his western characters say:

"...The gifts of the Almighty are weighed and parceled out in a scale peculiar to himself. It's no fair accountin' and I don't doubt but what he'd be the first to admit it and you put the query to him boldface." [4]

But, at the same time, the diligence of those given gifts in the parable are rewarded with more responsibility. Resources are a responsibility.

So we expect some inequalities, but we don't accept them.

Because Jesus also says: From everyone who has been given much, much will be demanded; and from the one who has been entrusted with much, much more will be asked.

We are judged according to our ability and limitations, according to the gifts and resources we've actually been given. And we are judged by how we used our freedom for the sake of others. Paul writes:

"It is for freedom that Christ has set us free...But do not use your freedom to indulge the flesh, rather serve one another humbly in love. For the entire law is fulfilled in keeping this one command: 'love your neighbor as yourself.'" (Galatians 5:1, 13b-14)

This does not mean that the Bible wants 'equal outcomes' for all people. The Bible isn't the dystopian world laid out by Kurt Vonnegut Jr. in 'Harrison Bergeron'. But it does mean:

Any freedom we have is freedom to be used for the good of the other.

[4] Cormac McCarthy, *Blood Meridian*, 129.

4. Freedom and Tyranny [Revisited]

So, God wants to set us free *from* tyranny. But Jesus doesn't overthrow Caesar. What gives?

In John 8:31-38 Jesus argues with some Jewish people regarding the promise he makes that if they follow Him they'll be free. They say, we are children of Abraham, we have never been anyone's slaves.

Then Jesus says: whoever sins is a slave to sin (v34).

Jesus is not a-political. Jesus' vision is not just a spiritual vision without social implications. Not at all, Au contraire. Jesus is *getting to the heart of the political issues, the soul of the social issues.*

Behind every Pharaoh and Caesar, every Tyrant and Dictator, is sin.

Jesus leads the Exodus of each of us away from the Pharaoh in our own hearts so we can stand before the Pharaoh's of the world.

Jesus' cross becomes our Mt. Sinai, the place where we have the life-giving relationship with the one true God made available to us.





Open Up

When did you feel the most 'free' in your life? How would you define the freedom you felt in that moment?

Dig In

1. How does knowing that God intervened in a real, political situation in the Exodus affect you? What does it confirm? What does it challenge?
2. Where in your life have you experienced that freedom is not 'freedom from restrictions' but 'freedom for the right restrictions'?
3. What gifts do you have, and how might the Lord be calling you to use them for the good of others?
4. What limitations in your life is God using to grow you in this season?

Prayer

Pray for issues of justice in our world that are close to you. Consider especially our relationships with the indigenous peoples of Canada out of respect for the day for truth and reconciliation.

Also pray for any concerns that came out of your discussion.