

Sermon 10-14-18  
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Based on the second lesson for the 21<sup>st</sup> Sunday after Pentecost, Hebrews 3:12-19

### **Victims Or Victors?**

Somewhere around 1,800 years Before Christ a nomadic family of shepherds from the land of Canaan settled in the land of Egypt. The family of Jacob, also known as Israel, came because one of Jacob's twelve sons, Joseph, had become the second most powerful ruler in Egypt. In Egypt, the Israelites, also known as Hebrews, grew from a family of 70 to a million and a half people over several centuries. This threatened native Egyptians greatly and the solution the government came up with was to enslave the Israelites. So for multiple generations Israelites served as slaves in Egypt.

But Jacob's family was no ordinary family. Yahweh, Creator of heaven, earth and everything that exists, had called Jacob's grandfather, Abraham, to a special status on earth. Yahweh had extended the same call to Jacob's father, Isaac, and to Jacob himself. Through these patriarchs Yahweh extended the same status to all their descendants. Yahweh was to be the God of the Israelites and they were to be His people. Yahweh made this special covenant with Israel while the rest of humanity was rejecting Him and falling into paganism. Yet, Yahweh allowed the Israelites to become slaves in Egypt.

Without ever having been a slave, it's difficult to imagine the emotional load of slavery. On the one hand there's always hope. Human beings cannot live without hope. For Israel it was hope in God and the hope of family. For Yahweh had promised to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob that their descendants would possess the land of Canaan – that is modern Israel, the West Bank, Gaza and parts of Jordan. But on the other hand there was despair. Egypt was the mightiest military power on earth at the time. Even though the Israelites were over a million strong, how would a group of unarmed slaves ever free themselves from the mightiest military power on earth?

Along with despair comes a sense of powerlessness. Masters control the lives of slaves. Masters control reward and punishment. Masters control labor, even the daily rhythm of life. The work of a slave does not belong to him. It belongs to the master.

With the powerlessness comes resentment. It's a slow, burning anger. But because of fear, resentment must be suppressed deep into the inner being and expressed to others only in secret, secure situations.

Fear is a constant companion of the slave. Human beings will not slave for others unless they are cowed with systemic threats and violence. Slaves are also bereft of what we consider to be human rights. There is no justice for the slave, only the arbitrary will of the master. If the master is a righteous person, the slave stands a chance, but if not . . . .

So, violence, fear, powerlessness, injustice, despair, resentment, revenge, yet hope – these are the constant companions of a slave. These feelings are at the root of a victim mentality. The masters of slaves want them to adopt a victim mentality. For those who adopt the victim mentality become like boats filled with water. They still float. But weighted down, they can't go anywhere. They would like to move forward, but their fears, despairs and resentments bind them in place.

When the time was right, Yahweh sent His chosen deliverer, Moses, to captive Israel. Although an Israelite, Moses had never been a slave. Scripture says that he was raised in the courts of Egypt's king, the Pharaoh, as an adopted child. Apocryphal books say that Moses also served for a number of decades as the king of present day Libya.

But Moses also knew a life of hardship. Scripture says that trying to save an Israelite he killed an Egyptian taskmaster. Therefore, he had to flee Egypt and spent more than a decade as a shepherd in what is now northern Saudi Arabia. It was there that God called him to lead Israel out of Egypt at a vigorous and young eighty years of age.

The Israelites Moses was to lead had no weapons and no military skill. They had been slaves for generations. The victim mentality had settled upon them. They would not be able to free themselves. Nevertheless, they would be freed because Yahweh willed it. Thus, the book of Exodus tells us how Yahweh sent ten plagues upon Egypt until Pharaoh consented to set Israel free. Exodus also tells us that Pharaoh then had a change of heart and pursued Israel with his army. In a mighty miracle, Yahweh opened a path through the middle of the Red Sea and Israel successfully crossed over to the Saudi Arabian side. But when Pharaoh's army attempted to cross, Yahweh collapsed the sea down upon them and all of Pharaoh's military might was drowned. After this, Exodus tells us that God brought Israel to Mount Sinai where He gave them His Law, beginning with the Ten Commandments.

But then came a crucial situation in Israel's history. Yahweh wanted Israel to head north and conquer what we know as present day Israel – the land promised to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. At that time the people living there were known as the Canaanites and the land was known as the land of Canaan. For the Israelites, though, it was the Promised Land – the land promised to them by God.

Twelve spies were sent out from the Israelite camp to gather information about the Promised Land. When they came back, two of them, Joshua and Caleb, gave encouraging reports about the land's fertility. Caleb urged Israel to go up and possess the land because they could certainly do it. But the other ten told a different story in Numbers 13:31-33, "31... 'We can't attack those people; they are stronger than we are.' 32 And they spread among the Israelites a bad report about the land they had explored. They said, 'The land we explored devours those living in it. All the people we saw there are of great size. 33 We saw the Nephilim there.... We seemed like grasshoppers in our own eyes, and we looked the same to them.'" The Nephilim were a clan of giants – 8,9,10, 12 or more feet in height.

The net result of this report was that most of Israel lapsed into victim mode. There was weeping and wailing. Some even proposed choosing a new leader and going back to Egypt. In opposition to this the two men of faith, Joshua and Caleb said to Israel in Numbers 14:8-9, "8 'If the LORD is pleased with us, he will lead us into

that land, a land flowing with milk and honey, and will give it to us. 9 Only do not rebel against the LORD. And do not be afraid of the people of the land, because we will swallow them up. Their protection is gone, but the LORD is with us. Do not be afraid of them.”

But Israel would not be moved out of victim mode. Finally Yahweh appeared to Moses and said in Numbers 14:11, “... ‘How long will these people treat me with contempt? How long will they refuse to believe in me, in spite of all the miraculous signs I have performed among them?’” And that was the essence of the thing. Israel had seen Yahweh’s power unexpectedly delivering them from Egypt. But now that they would have to fight for the Promised Land themselves, they could not imagine how God would deliver that land into their hands. Only Moses, Joshua and Caleb believed that Yahweh would do it.

Yahweh was angry with Israel’s unbelief and threatened to destroy them all. Moses pleaded with Yahweh not to do so. Therefore, Yahweh delivered this judgment against Israel in Numbers 14:29-33, “29 In this desert your bodies will fall – every one of you twenty years old or more who was counted in the census and who has grumbled against me. 30 Not one of you will enter the land I swore with uplifted hand to make your home, except Caleb son of Jephunneh and Joshua son of Nun. 31 As for your children that you said would be taken as plunder, I will bring them in to enjoy the land you have rejected. 32 But you – your bodies will fall in this desert. 33 Your children will be shepherds here for forty years, suffering for your unfaithfulness, until the last of your bodies lies in the desert.”

Referencing this event and several other times that Israel rebelled against Yahweh during those forty years, a psalm writer wrote much later under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit in Psalm 95:7-11, “Today, if you hear his [Yahweh’s] voice, 8 do not harden your hearts as you did at Meribah, as you did that day at Massah in the desert, 9 where your fathers tested and tried me, though they had seen what I did. 10 For forty years I was angry with that generation; I said, ‘They are a people whose hearts go astray, and they have not known my ways.’ 11 So I declared on oath in my anger, ‘They shall never enter my rest.’”

What Yahweh means by His rest is the Promised Land. Yahweh wanted to give Israel relief from Egyptian slavery and rest from all their enemies in the Promised Land. The Promised Land was the place especially appointed by Yahweh as the place of rest – Yahweh’s rest.

We don’t know who the writer of the New Testament book of Hebrews was. It was probably Paul or Apollos. But in today’s reading from Hebrews, the writer quotes Psalm 95. Only the writer sees God’s rest not as the Promised Land, but as something far greater, Jesus Christ.

I heard a podcast from an English evangelist named Joe Kirby. He spoke of open air preaching in London’s Hyde Park. Afterwards a Muslim man spoke with him. At the end of the conversation the man declared, “I’m going to go into my room, close the curtains and cry out to Jesus Christ to save me.” If that man did so, he entered God’s rest – Jesus Christ.

How is Jesus God’s rest? Like the Israelites, all of us are in a struggle with Yahweh. It’s over our sin, rebellion, disobedience and unbelief. But Jesus has ended the struggle with His suffering, death and resurrection. When Jesus cried out on the

cross, "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?" He proved that He was suffering hell for us – abandoned by God and thrust out of God's presence. So, having suffered for our sins, Jesus brings rest with God to all those who cry out to Him for forgiveness of their sins, eternal life and salvation. Jesus is the Promised Land. He is the Way, the Truth and the Life. Jesus is rest with God. He is heaven.

The writer of Hebrews brings us to a warning, however. He writes in Hebrews 3:12-14, "12 See to it, brothers, that none of you has a sinful, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God. 13 But encourage one another daily, as long as it is called Today, so that none of you may be hardened by sin's deceitfulness. 14 We have come to share in Christ if we hold firmly till the end the confidence we had at first. 15 As has just been said: 'Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as you did in the rebellion.'"

In other words, don't be deceived by this culture's pagan teaching that Jesus is irrelevant. Jesus is irrelevant only if you were born immortal. But if you're going to die, then He is your only hope. Today is still a day of God's grace. All who call upon the Name of Jesus can enter rest with God. They can enter a new world because Jesus is not just the Way to heaven, He is the Way to more righteous living here. Therefore, as evangelist Joe Kirby exhorted in his podcast, "Will you go home and cry out to Jesus, 'Save me! Save me!'"

The only thing stopping anyone from doing this is what we read in Hebrews 3:19, "So we see that they [Israel] were not able to enter [the Promised Land], because of their unbelief." Unbelief in God is the root of all our troubles. And by this I don't mean just salvation. It's at the root of many problems in this life.

The unbelief of the Israelites was directly related to their victim mentality. They said to themselves, "we've always been slaves. We're not warriors. We're not strong enough. We can't do it." They were stuck. Their victim mentality was their million ton anchor. And as a result they could not in any way believe the unstoppable force who is God Almighty, Creator of the universe acting on their behalf. Therefore, they took the final step that the victim mentality always takes. They blamed someone else. They blamed Moses and they blamed Yahweh for bringing them into the desert to die.

An upstate clinical psychiatrist was on the radio the other day and he said this: "When people come into my office and they say they have terrible childhoods – and maybe it's legit, they were mistreated, they were abused – I can sympathize, I can empathize, and I can say that was horrible. Now we have to do the work of getting you past it. And continuing to blame people doesn't help. And having the attitude that somebody else must change in order for me to feel better is backwards."

As long as Israel blamed Moses and Yahweh, as long as they demanded that Yahweh and Moses change instead of themselves, they were stuck in victim mentality. And by sentencing Israel to wander forty years in the wilderness Yahweh showed them that He refuses to respond to the victim mentality that causes unbelief. Understand that throughout Scripture Yahweh declares Himself to be on the side of any victims who will place their trust in Him and grow in Him. But He leaves unbelieving victims who blame others for their misfortune to flounder in their victimhood.

The children of that generation of Israelites, who by faith in Yahweh came to see themselves as victors, conquered the Promised Land forty years later. But the generation that considered themselves victims and fell into unbelief never saw it. They never entered God's rest.

In Jesus Christ all victims are set free to become victors in Christ. This is true even if they remain in physical bondage. This is how persecuted believers have seen themselves down through the centuries. It's how Christians could go to the lions or be beheaded by ISIS without renouncing Jesus. It's how Christians could be free even while they languished in Communist prison camps. It's the reason why Christians are so dangerous. Victors in Christ cannot be cowed into victim status by all the standard mental procedures used to enslave human beings. By His suffering, death and resurrection Jesus truly has set believers free – free to gain the righteousness of God in the Kingdom of heaven, and free to overcome any situation that we might face on this earth.

Back on September 16<sup>th</sup> our gospel lesson included an exchange between Jesus and a distraught father. Jesus declared to the man in Mark 9:23, "Everything is possible for him who believes." The man responded in Mark 9:24, "I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!" This is our prayer. And perhaps we should add to it: "Lord, by your sacrifice you have freed me from being a victim. Help me overcome feeling like one." As the writer of Hebrews exhorts us, therefore, let us encourage one another in Jesus Christ to the very end. Amen.

All Bible quotes are from the NIV.