Who Will You Cry Out To?

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[0:00] This is the one who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy, yet he has no root in himself but endures for a while.

! And when tribulation or persecution arises on account of the word, immediately he falls away. Last time in Exodus, we ended with a scene of worship. Moses and Aaron told God's people the gospel. The Lord has come down to save ye. And we were told at the end of our reading, the people believed. And when they heard the Lord had visited the people of Israel and seen their affliction, they bowed their heads and worshipped.
It was a glimmer of faith in what has been a dark and a winding road so far in Exodus. But that embryonic faith is about to be tested to breaking point.
Jesus told a parable about a man sowing seeds in a field. Famously, the seeds fall in four types of soil. And each soil in the parable, he says, stands for a different type of hearer or listener to God's good news.
[1:15] Of those four soil conditions, only the good soil goes on to bear fruit. The weedy soil lets the seeds grow for a bit but chokes them so that their growth is stunted.

However, I wonder if you can recognize these other two soil conditions from our passage in Exodus this morning. The rocky soil is shallow.
So while the seeds grow quickly, their roots don't grow down deep. And so when the scorching sun rises on them and beats down on them, they wither up.
And the seed that falls on the path, well, the soil is so hard that the seeds just sit there on the surface until the birds come and eat them all up. Exodus happened a millennium and a half before Jesus said that.
But the gospels say he was simply revealing what had been hidden since the beginning of the world. This is how people respond to the gospel. And so it's ever been.
[2:17] Very quickly, we've moved from a full-blown revival meeting into two chapters where it feels very much like the only person who believes God's promises is God himself.

Pharaoh, who is the Lord, that I should obey his voice? The Israelites did not listen to Moses because of their broken spirit and harsh slavery.
Even Moses, oh Lord, why have you done evil to this people? You've not delivered your people at all. It feels like the wheels are coming off God's rescue plan before it's even started.
And the seedlings that sprouted in chapter 4 are reduced to compost in chapters 5 and 6 through the work of an evil one snatching the word away and pulverizing it with persecution.
The slave barracks of Egypt might feel a million miles from us today. But friends, when was the last time you found yourself thinking, living as a Christian in this world is just so hard?
[3:27] The heat is on. The cost has gone way up. I feel the pressure every day. To be honest, I'm really discouraged in my faith.

And the temptation is relentless. I don't know how long I can go on like this. I'm not as sure as I used to be that God's good news is really quite so good.
And then we share God's good news and watch it fall on deaf ears and hard hearts and come to nothing. This morning, Exodus introduces us to an enemy who goes to extremes to stop God's people from hearing and believing God's good news.
And brothers and sisters, Jesus is clear that we have such an enemy. Not Pharaoh, king of Egypt, but that ancient serpent, the devil, the deceiver of the whole world.
And the question this passage puts to us, therefore, is this. When our enemy is trying his hardest to beat the gospel out of us, who do we cry out to for rescue?

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[4:36] Do we plead with him, please, to treat us nicely and we'll fall back into line? Or do we cry out to the Lord who staked his name on rescuing and redeeming us from sin and darkness into the glorious kingdom of his Son as he promised long ago?

That's a heart battle that I know that you have. Because I have it too. That is the cosmic battle in which we live as God's people.
A battle, a spiritual battle for the hearts and minds of God's people. Every day, we have a choice to make who we're going to serve, who we're going to turn to.
And Exodus this morning wants to push us hard into the arms of the Lord so that we cry out to him from our sin and suffering and cling by faith to the glorious rescue that he promises in his gospel.
So let's see how that battle plays out in Exodus 5 and 6. Two points this morning, starting with most of chapter 5. Service of the serpent king is soul-crushing slavery.
[5:46] As they got themselves ready to go into Pharaoh, Moses and Aaron would be encouraged, I guess, by the early signs. The Lord had said his people would listen and believe, and they did.

So in they go to Pharaoh on a high. And we shouldn't miss how brave this is, verse 1. What do they say? Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel, Let my people go, that they may hold a feast to me in the wilderness.
It would be hard enough, I think, to say that to a human dictator, a powerful ruler. When the Syrian dictator Bashar al-Assad was ousted, shortly after they filmed inside the prisons where opponents of the regime had been held and tortured.
And perhaps, like me, you thought, that's a man that I wouldn't have wanted to upset. Pharaoh has successfully enslaved an entire civilization. Later we find out that there were 600,000 men, plus women and children.
This is not a man to cross lightly. But Pharaoh actually had one over on most tyrants in that he was also seen as the living connection between this world and the supernatural realm.
[7:04] He was treated as a god. Which makes Moses and Aaron's message a lot more offensive. For a start, it's claiming to be from a real god, the Lord, and, not least, the God of Israel, Pharaoh's slaves.

It contains a command for him, Let my people go. And the reason is so that his slaves can go and worship their own god instead of him. Notice, too, that this makes Moses and Aaron the link between heaven and earth, not Pharaoh.
Everything that they say in verse 1 is a royal slap in the face. But at this point, at this point, God's messengers massively step up.
I think it's worth pausing to say that this is the first time in the Bible that someone begins their sentence with the words, Thus says the Lord.
That phrase will come up over 400 more times in the Old Testament. It comes to define the ministry of the faithful prophets that stand downstream from Moses who spoke God's word simply because it's God's word.
[8:16] It wasn't up to them what to say, when to say it, who to say it to you. God decides. All that was left to them was to say it.

Here, for the first time, Moses and Aaron do that bravely and boldly. And I think that's a lesson for us all to learn, that when we faithfully speak the message of God's word, whether from a pulpit or over coffee, that we speak in his name.
And therefore, we don't shrink back, but speak bravely with this God-given authority to a world that often doesn't want to listen to what God has to say.
Our mantra is, Thus says the Lord. Pharaoh's response to that is predictable, but telling, verse 2, Pharaoh said, Who is the Lord that I should obey his voice and let Israel go?
I don't know the Lord, and moreover, I will not let Israel go. We already know he wouldn't let the people go easily. God had said that to Moses.
[9:26] But his reason is striking. Who is this Lord? Don't know him. I left you with a question last time. Why doesn't God pick to have a quick and easy rescue?

Someone after the service came to me and said, Could it be because God wants to teach us something that we would otherwise miss? I think that's right.
The question then is, what is it that he wants to take his time to teach us? Here is your first clue, but hold on to that question to the end, and I promise we will get further.

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For now, though, what follows is surely one of the most twisted chapters in the Old Testament. There are more gory chapters, but for sheer cruelty, I think this is way up there.
Because Pharaoh's response to God's message, let my people go, is to suffocate them under a workload that is deliberately impossible to complete, and then when they can't complete it, to call them slackers.
[10:32] See, up to now, God's people have been forced to do back-breaking, physical labor, building entire cities out of stone and bricks, but they were provided with the raw materials to do so.

Now, Pharaoh says, you will no longer give the people straw to make bricks as in the past. Let them go and find their own straw, but the number of bricks that they made in the past, you will still impose on them.
So now the Israelites have to find their own raw materials, but the daily quota is the same. Straw was mixed with mud to make bricks for the same sort of reason that gravel is mixed into concrete to give it strength and structure.
But remember that at this point, the Israelites were herders, not farmers. So they wouldn't have had straw in their fields to collect, and so they were scattered through the whole of Egypt to find stubble that they could use for straw.
Meanwhile, the taskmasters were urgent. Complete your work as when there was straw. I was chatting with someone last week who's just finished working as a delivery driver for, let's say, a large online company.
[11:50] It was unpleasant, he said, because the pressure was relentless. Not only was a large part of the salary made up by a bonus scheme, he also had to hire the van from the company and pay for most of the fuel.

The bonus was also quite easy to lose. A package, he said, left behind the plant pot instead of behind the bin could cost you your bonus for that delivery round.
A late delivery or a failed delivery could cost the whole team of drivers their bonus. If you did well, he said, and managed to get your bonus, the next delivery round, the company would give you more packages to deliver, and if you completed your round that time, they would give you even more up to the point that it was physically impossible to deliver all the packages.
And if you didn't get round in time, he said, the route would close down, the app would shut down, and everything that was left was counted as a failed delivery and you would lose your bonus again.
The pressure to be out in the van was non-stop, he said. They would work you day and night if they could. I couldn't help feeling that the system was rigged against the driver's success, suffocating them with work but punishing them for not completing it because for the company, it was worth keeping the drivers dangling over the edge of failure so that they would scrabble harder to deliver more packages and survive.
[13:26] Three and a half thousand years ago, Pharaoh had a very similar business model of constant pressure and built-in failure except his main objectives were not delivering packages or even building cities.

One was, verse 5, to keep a large population that he feared busy. Pharaoh said, behold, the people of the land are now many and ye make them rest from their burdens. This is a new Pharaoh but with the same old anxieties.
The slavery began, remember, with the first Pharaoh saying, there's so many Hebrews, if they rise up, we're done for. And so the slavery was given to them to preempt any rebellion that they might be.
But now there's an even more sinister objective as well, verse 9. Let heavier work be laid on the men that they may labor at it and pay no regard to lying words.
Pharaoh's plan is to use the slavery to close God's people's ears to his message and turn their hearts away from his messengers.
[14:38] I wonder if you find that, that suffering over here in our lives can lead to spiritual challenges over here in our lives.

Our faith can be tested when our bodies suffer a difficult diagnosis, old age, chronic pain, disability. And when our minds suffer, depression, anxiety, insomnia, panic attacks, we can struggle spiritually through things like loneliness, exhaustion, neglect, grief, poverty, abuse.
James in the New Testament says that we face trials of various kinds which test our faith. And I think I would be surprised if anyone here doesn't already know that from experience.

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God's people are hit here with a very intense trial. Right at the end of our passage, Moses tells them a glorious message about God's promise to save them. I'm coming to your rescue, but we read, they did not listen to Moses because of their broken spirit and harsh slavery.
[16:01] If you're here this morning and your spirit is broken, so much so that you are struggling to listen and take it all in, let me say, I'm glad you're here, you're in the right place.

Speak to somebody afterwards, come and find me, we can talk about it, we can pray about it. Because suffering doesn't need to suffocate our faith in that way.
In fact, James says, you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness, and let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.
There's no definite correlation between people with the easiest lives and people who live as Christians. In fact, it's probably the opposite way around.
Where Christianity is strongest is often where life is hardest for people. because it's not the suffering itself that hardens our hearts, is it? But the enemy who can use our suffering as a tool to harden us.
[17:10] Our circumstances really matter, let me underscore that. But we find it easier, don't we, to point to the seen things and the felt things as the cause of our spiritual challenges, and we find it much harder and we are slower to remember that there are unseen powers working behind the scenes to close our ears and turn our hearts from the Lord.

We live as if our battle was against flesh and blood and not, as we are told, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.
the risk for us when we do that is that instead of crying out to the one who can deliver us, we cry out instead like the Israelites to the very things that are slowly destroying us.
Think about it, by now the Israelites have been slaves in Egypt for something like 80 years. In verse 14, some of them are beaten for missing this impossible quota.
They go to see Pharaoh and ask, why do you treat your servants like this? It's delusional. Do they not know who they're serving? Why would they expect this man not to treat them poorly?
[18:29] This is unreasonable, they say. You are slackers, he says. Get back to work. Friends, if we treat our suffering as if it's the cause of our spiritual setbacks, we're playing the enemy's game, which we cannot win, and we end up back in slavery to things that are not God.

If we tell ourselves we need to get better first and then my faith will recover, then we become slaves of our health, which will beat us up with every setback.
If we tell ourselves I need to get over my anxiety and then I'll come back to church, we become slaves of our anxiety. And it's punishing and never-ending demands.
If we tell ourselves I'd be in a better place spiritually if I wasn't lonely or isolated, we become slaves of others. We live and die with every WhatsApp, every like on social media, every new relationship. And we'll come to church or we'll speak with a Christian friend who says, stop serving those idols, they're destroying you, and we'll blame them for making it worse.
[19:39] That's not what I need to hear right now, we'll say. Moses and Aaron told Pharaoh, let my people go, says God. But verse 20, the Hebrew former met Moses and Aaron who were waiting for them as they came out from Pharaoh and said, the Lord look on you and judge.

All you've done is made it worse. And friends, that is exactly, that is exactly what Pharaoh wanted. Their ears are closed to God's messengers, their hearts are hardened against his message.
Brothers and sisters, that is the enemy's great objective, that in your suffering you cry out to your idols to save you, which can only deepen the pain, and learn to resent the gospel for offering the help that you need instead of the help that you want.
I'd love to be free in the promised land, Moses, of course I want that, but right now, what I want is the straw back to make my slavery more comfortable. I'd love to have a hope that will never let me down, a love that will never let me go, a peace that surpasses understanding, but right now, I'd settle for a hospital appointment, a boyfriend, a girlfriend, better hours, fill in the blank.
Once that stuff's sorted out, then you can tell me the gospel, we can do that Bible study, I'll be back in church, that'll be great, but right now, I've got bigger problems than having eternal life and abiding in Christ.
[21:17] Friends, serving the serpent king, our idols, the stuff of this life, the God of this world, is soul-crushing slavery. Why cry out to those things when that is literally what is squeezing the life out of you?

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When instead, we could cry out to the one who offers us freely life in all of its fullness. Secondly then, let's turn to him.
Rescued by the Lord gives the certain promise of blessing, after such a hopeful start in Egypt, it's clear by verse 22, things haven't gone the way that Moses thought.
Pharaoh doubles down, God's people's faith is crushed, and Moses turned to the Lord and said, O Lord, why have you done evil to this people?
Very strong words. Moses overstepped the line here between complaining complaining to God, which is fine, and complaining about God, which is not.
[22:23] You can't accuse God of doing evil and failing to keep his promises with your head bowed in worship, can you? The Psalms often wrestle with the character, the promises of God, but there's a difference between saying, where are your promises that I trust in, and you've not kept your promises, I don't know if I can trust you.

The clue that it's the latter for Moses is that he doesn't use God's name here, Yahweh, or the Lord in capitals, but lowercase Lord. It suggests a kind of coldness, like calling your dad father.
There's a kind of formality there, which doesn't quite belong in that relationship. But as so often, the Lord simply overlooks Moses' tantrum and sends him back out with some more glorious good news.
Firstly, he reassures Moses that he is still in full control of the situation. Sixth verse one, the Lord said to Moses, now you shall see what I will do to Pharaoh, for with a strong hand he'll send them out, and with a strong hand he'll drive them out of his land.
So he's saying it's almost as if Pharaoh had to swing so far in one direction, the wrong direction, so that when the Lord causes him to swing to the other extreme, it will be a complete 180.
[23:45] Not that we would ever have thought that Pharaoh, you know, he's such a softie. But this way, there can be no doubt whatsoever that it's the Lord who turns it all around and not Pharaoh.

Pharaoh doesn't give in through persuasion, he buckles through compulsion from not letting them go, to not letting them stay. Secondly, and mainly though, the Lord reassures Moses that he is still faithful.
He goes back over the promises that he made to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob and says, I will keep them. Verse eight, I will bring you to the land I swore to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.
Verse seven, I will take you to be my people and I will be your God. And so to give them those promised blessings, verse six, I will bring you out from the burdens of the Egyptians, I will deliver you from slavery to them, I will redeem you with an outstretched arm and with great acts of judgment.
What's he saying? I will, I will, I will save you. Once isn't enough, twice, three times even, five times, I will bring you out, deliver you, redeem you, take you, bring you, because I've heard you, verse five.
[25:11] You're groaning, you're cries. It's like a fiance, he's popped the question to his future wife, put a ring on her finger, but then it all goes wrong.

Where is he? Where is he to help me? My love, I know what I've promised. I will be yours, you will be mine.
I asked you to marry me, you said yes, now ask me, will you take this woman to be your wedded wife? I will, I will. And what's the application?
Well, the Lord simply tells us, verse seven, I will take you to be my people and I will be your God and you shall know that I am the Lord, your God.
You've waited really patiently for this. What is it the Lord wants us to know that will take him so long to teach us? Then you will know who I really am.
[26:14] What couldn't he have taught us in a quick and easy rescue? Who he is. How does he begin and end these words of reassurance?

With his name, I am the Lord. And what does he do in between? Stakes his name on these promises. This is how I want you to know me, he says, as the promise-keeping God who is mighty to save, mighty to wed you, mighty to bring you home.
I will, I will, I will. And we're not the only ones he wants to know that, but that's for next week. For now, the point is, brothers and sisters, God's great objective in salvation, in rescuing us, is to make himself known to us, to bring us into a personal, loving, and ever-deepening relationship with himself.

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the enemy's objective is to prevent that from happening by distraction and lies and trying to twist God's good providences in our lives against him in our hearts.
But the Lord is so faithful and so powerful. Our lives are so secure with him. His salvation is so certain and his plans so sure that he is willing to let the bad stuff take longer than we want and get harder than we can bear so that we will see the more clearly who he is as he delivers us and redeems us, sustains and protects us, guides and guards us, and blesses us all the way through it.
[28:05] So friends, let me ask, whose objective is winning in your life right now? Who do you cry out to to rescue in your day-to-day?

The Lord who wants to be known as our steadfast savior or the things that, if we're honest, turn us off him and against him? The people who first heard Exodus have that same choice before them, go back to Egypt, pick up the broken chains and put them back on or press on to Canaan and the promise of God's future blessing.
Was the slavery that they knew back there not better than the promises that are over there that they don't know yet? Exodus says, let me remind you how brutal and crushing your slavery was, how great and glorious is your salvation and how awesome is your God, the Lord.
Friends, these chapters are supposed to push us hard back into the loving arms of the Lord who's redeemed us from slavery to sin and who promises us the whole world to come.
So here's the question to end with. in the circumstances of your life right now, the things that you are suffering through, the ways in which you are sinning, the doubts that you have, stuff that you are living through, is your heart set on the Lord and the ransom he's paid for you with his own blood and the hope that he gives to you the life to come.
[30:00] In short, are your ears open and your heart soft now to the promise of his gospel? Or, are your ears half closed, your heart half hardened, and your eyes half looking back to the slavery that he freed you from in search of comfort and rescue?

That is the daily battle for your heart and mine. Friends, today, this week, let us not cry out to our old slave masters and idols for rescue.
That will crush us. But cry out daily to the Lord who not only will save you, but has delivered us, has redeemed us, has taken us to be his own through the saving work of his son, our savior, the Lord Jesus Christ.
Let's cry out to him together now as we pray. Father in heaven, we cry out to you.
We turn to you now with softness of heart. Thank you for your word, Lord, that plows our hearts. Thank you for that seed of your gospel sown today.
[31:33] And we ask, Lord, that you would help us to cry out to you from our sin, from our suffering. Lord, continue to free us from the things that hold us and cling to us so closely.

Lord, forgive us that we have loved too much the things of this world and of this life and made them our gods rather than you. Father, we pray this week, each day, help us to turn to you from whatever the circumstances are that we face.
Help us to trust your good purposes and that you don't always choose the quick and easy way but, Lord, you choose the long way so that we might learn who you truly are. So teach us, we pray, deepen our love and our relationship with you that we might know that you are the Lord, the God of our salvation.
Help us, we ask in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

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