

DOOR FOUR

Finding the Path to Freedom | Press Pause (Part 1)

Text: Exo 31:14-15; Isa 58:13-14; Mat 11:28-29; Rom 12:2

Living in Egypt

Do you ever feel like your life is moving too fast or the weight of it is more than you know how to carry? From the time you arise, you move and manage and multi-task at an almost unrelenting pace. Your inbox and to-do lists and social streams fill up faster than you can handle them. Your heart pounds with the pressure of expectations at work or at home. You think, "If only I work a bit harder or longer or faster or smarter, I'll get on top of this." But you don't or you can't. So you become increasingly numb, or drink too much, or collapse exhausted at night then repeat the cycle again.

Does any of this sound familiar? Part of our problem surely has to do with the power of the systems in which we are caught up today. Technology, competition, and affluence have got the hamster wheel spinning faster than at any other time in history. But the underlying experience is a very old one, as the first few chapters of the biblical book of Exodus make clear. The ancient Egyptians, like modern Americans, were a famously industrious people. Driven by the exacting demands of gods and Pharaohs alike, the Egyptians built cities, farms, and monuments on an unprecedented scale. Their major workforce for this expansion was the Hebrew people (or Israelites). And, like a company that keeps upping the quota for an effective salesperson, the Egyptians kept asking more and more of the Israelites. At one point, Pharaoh gave the instruction to his foremen: **You are no longer to supply the people with straw for making bricks; let them go and gather their own straw. But require them to make the same number of bricks as before; don't reduce the quota. They are lazy; that is why they are crying out, "Let us go and sacrifice to our God."** (Exo 5:7-8)

It's a system that demands ever-increasing energy without real regard for the health of its participants. Not unlike today. The media companies, advertisers, and gadgeteers aren't going to moderate themselves on our behalf, any more than Pharaoh did for the Israelites. The youth sports organizations and commercial enterprises aren't going to say: "Oh, I see you are feeling over-programmed. You need more time to honor your God or attend to the other important relationships of your life. Let us scale back our demands." No, far more likely, they'll keep asking for more bricks as your supply of straw – the stuff that holds it all together for you – is in ever-shorter supply.

Facing Our Voluntary Slavery

Unlike the Israelites, of course, ours is sometimes not so much a forced obedience as it is a voluntary slavery to the systems of our time. In this regard, I'm reminded of Judith Viorst's famous poem, "Self-Improvement Program": I've finished six pillows in needlepoint / And I'm reading Jane Austen and Kant, / And I'm up to the pork with black beans in Chinese Cooking. / I don't have to struggle to find myself / For I already know what I want. / I want to be healthy and wise / and extremely good-looking. // I'm

learning new glazes in Pottery Class, / And I'm playing new chords in Guitar, / And in Yoga I'm starting to master the lotus position. / I don't have to ponder priorities / For I already know what they are: / To be good-looking, healthy, and wise. / And adored in addition. // I'm improving my serve with a tennis pro, / And I'm practicing my verb forms in Greek/ And in Primal Scream Therapy all my frustrations are vented. / I don't have to ask what I'm searching for / Since I already know that I seek / To be good-looking, healthy, and wise / And adored. / And contented. // I've bloomed in Organic Gardening, / And in Dance I have tightened my thighs, / And in Consciousness Raising there's no one around who can top me. / And I'm working all day / And I'm working all night / To be good-looking, healthy, and wise. / And adored. / And contented. // And brave. / And well-read. / And a marvelous hostess, / And bilingual, / And athletic, / And artistic... / **Won't someone please STOP me?**

What really drives the hurry and clutter in our lives? Is it any of the impulses that Judith describes? Is it the fear that if we don't raise excelling kids we will look like losers? Is it the sense that everyone else is doing this so that we should too? Is our relentless life fueled by the desire to drown out the cries of some demon in our past, or to prove ourselves worthy, or to feel needed, or to finally "arrive"? Do we even allow ourselves the time and space to ponder what it is that lashes us on and enslaves us?

Sometimes, I just feel sorry for myself. I feel frustrated with life, weary of the perpetual treadmill, completely overwhelmed, and I fantasize out loud: "I'm going to walk away from all this. I'm going to move to New Zealand and become a librarian!" And my wife, Amy, will say: Go ahead and do that, Dan. But just remember that **wherever you go, there YOU are.**" And I think: Why did I marry that woman? Because she's so often right – and definitely right about this!

If I am to have a different and better experience of moving through this world, then my best strategy for altering the journey is not to vainly wish or wait for the world to slow down or lighten up or get more simple. Life in Egypt (or any other country) will always be this way. Pharaoh is everywhere. So my best strategy for a saner, healthier life is to change something in me. If I can bring a purer heart, a clearer mind, a more serene soul, a more refreshed body to the world I move through, I will experience LIFE differently. Others will experience ME differently. Because wherever I go, there I am.

Adopting a Strategy for Improvement

Do you have a strategy for improving the SELF that you bring to every realm and relationship of your life? If you are familiar with the rest of the story told in the book of Exodus, then you know that God ultimately freed his people from their oppressive bondage to Pharaoh. Through his prophet Moses, God led his people out of Egypt and toward the Promised Land. But God also saw that there was no way the Israelites could live into the full flourishing he had in mind for them, without certain things changing within them first – because wherever they went, there THEY were!

So God gave the Hebrew people ten vital instructions to help shape a new INTERNAL operating system in them that would keep them from being sucked into and damaged by the EXTERNAL systems of any other culture through which they passed. The FIRST 3

Commandments teach who God is and how he is to be worshiped, because being properly connected to God is the fount of everything else good in life. The LAST 6 Commandments were instructions about how people are to love and live with one another, because proper connection with each other is essential to everyone's thriving.

But right between the three keys to loving God and the six keys to loving one another sits the FOURTH COMMANDMENT. It is the longest and most specific of all God's commandments, and it reads: **Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a sabbath to the Lord your God. On it you shall not do any work... For in six days the Lord made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but he rested on the seventh day. Therefore the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy. (Exo 20:8-11)**

We're going to talk a lot more about the meaning and practice of Sabbath-keeping in these next weeks, but let me just leave you with a few important ideas for you to take with you today. FIRST, the Hebrew word Sabbath (shabbath) literally means to cease or STOP. Sabbath is God's answer to Judith Viorst's manic life and desperate prayer: "Will someone please STOP me?" God says: "I will and I am. For the sake of your relationship with me... for the sake of your connection with others... for the sake of the health of your own heart, soul, mind, and body (that's the biblical definition of SELF)... I, the Lord your God, command you to STOP.

Do you ever Press Pause when you're watching a movie at home? I do so regularly. Why? Sometimes, I really want to focus in on the goodness and beauty of what's in that frame. So I stop to study and savor it. Sometimes, I want time to reflect on and make sense of what has just happened in the story. Sometimes, I Press Pause because there's somebody else in the room who needs my full and undivided attention. Sometimes, I stop because I want to calm and center myself in order to be better prepared to absorb and respond to what is about to happen next.

Do you get where I'm going? Your life, that of your loved ones, and God's presence with you, is the Major Motion Picture that is playing itself out every week. For the sake of God, your loved one's, and your SELF, don't blitz through it distractedly! You can't rent your life again next month. Press Pause more often before it's over! Study and savor your life and the magnificent God who is giving it all to you. Reflect on and make sense of what just happened and what he is trying to teach you. Give God and the people around you your full attention. Devote time to recovering or retuning your heart, soul, mind, and strength so you'll be better prepared for the next part of the story.

SECONDLY, we are to Press Pause at least once per week. Sabbath is to be a one full day per week discipline. God commands us to set aside (that's what the term to "make holy" means) an entire day, once per week, for the purposes I've just described. I am humiliated when I consider how disobedient to this command I have been over the course of my life. I have treated it as the "Fourth Suggestion." It's the one commandment whose breaking I actually brag about: "I'm just so busy!" But, think about it: If God Almighty himself can rest on the seventh day and we're out there acting as if the world couldn't possibly go on without our activity, how arrogant are we?

In ancient Israel, the decision to violate the sabbath was viewed as such an affront to God and an attack on the health of the whole community that one version of the 4th Commandment reads: **Anyone who desecrates it is to be put to death. Those who do any work on that day must be cut off from their people. (Exo 31:14-15)** Is it possible that my or your inability to enter into Sabbath rest IS killing us physically, spiritually, and relationally? I fear this is true. But what I fear even more is what we are missing.

I read recently of a general in the Persian army who had the custom of giving condemned criminals a strange choice just before their prospective execution. On one occasion a spy was brought to the general, who asked the question, "What will it be: the firing squad or the big, black door?" The spy hesitated for a long time. It was a difficult decision. He chose the firing squad. Moments later shots rang out confirming his demise. The general then turned to his aide and said: "They always prefer the known way to the unknown. It is characteristic of people to be afraid of the undefined. Yet, we gave him a choice." The aide said, "What lies beyond the big door?" "Freedom," replied the general. "I've known only a few brave enough to take it."

The LAST idea I want to impress upon you today is that Sabbath is the path to freedom. Like the Israelites of old, many of us live our lives in bondage. We are slaves to a 24/7//365 culture of production, consumption, and excess. We believe that we are only as valuable as our constant DOING. Surrounded by others who do likewise, we can hardly imagine another way. But we do have a choice. We can walk through DOOR #4 and find a new kind of freedom. Pick one day in the next seven and go through the Sabbath Door. See what God does with that in your life and through your life.

If you keep your feet from breaking the Sabbath and from doing as you please on my holy day, if you call the Sabbath a delight and the Lord's holy day honorable, and if you honor it by not going your own way and not doing as you please or speaking idle words, then you will find your joy in the Lord. (Isa 58:13-14). Or, in the words of He who meets us at this table: **Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. (Mat 11:28)**