

Exodus 14:19–29 (NIV)

¹⁹ Then the angel of God, who had been traveling in front of Israel's army, withdrew and went behind them. The pillar of cloud also moved from in front and stood behind them, ²⁰ coming between the armies of Egypt and Israel. Throughout the night the cloud brought darkness to the one side and light to the other side; so neither went near the other all night long.

²¹ Then Moses stretched out his hand over the sea, and all that night the LORD drove the sea back with a strong east wind and turned it into dry land. The waters were divided, ²² and the Israelites went through the sea on dry ground, with a wall of water on their right and on their left.

²³ The Egyptians pursued them, and all Pharaoh's horses and chariots and horsemen followed them into the sea. ²⁴ During the last watch of the night the LORD looked down from the pillar of fire and cloud at the Egyptian army and threw it into confusion. ²⁵ He jammed the wheels of their chariots so that they had difficulty driving. And the Egyptians said, "Let's get away from the Israelites! The LORD is fighting for them against Egypt."

²⁶ Then the LORD said to Moses, "Stretch out your hand over the sea so that the waters may flow back over the Egyptians and their chariots and horsemen."

²⁷ Moses stretched out his hand over the sea, and at daybreak the sea went back to its place. The Egyptians were fleeing toward it, and the LORD swept them into the sea. ²⁸ The water flowed back and covered the chariots and horsemen—the entire army of Pharaoh that had followed the Israelites into the sea. Not one of them survived.

²⁹ But the Israelites went through the sea on dry ground, with a wall of water on their right and on their left.

Mark 14:22–25 (NIV)

²² While they were eating, Jesus took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to his disciples, saying, "Take it; this is my body."

²³ Then he took a cup, and when he had given thanks, he gave it to them, and they all drank from it.

²⁴ "This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many," he said to them. ²⁵ "Truly I tell you, I will not drink again from the fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new in the kingdom of God."

Galatians 5:13–18 (NIV)

¹³ You, my brothers and sisters, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the flesh; rather, serve one another humbly in love. ¹⁴ For the entire law is fulfilled in keeping this one command: "Love your neighbor as yourself." ¹⁵ If you bite and devour each other, watch out or you will be destroyed by each other.

¹⁶ So I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh. ¹⁷ For the flesh desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the flesh. They are in conflict with each other, so that you are not to do whatever you want. ¹⁸ But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law.

*Freedom from slavery and freedom from Sin.
God is the bringer of liberty!*

Freedom. When we come to the story of the Exodus and to the story of the Last Supper and Jesus' crucifixion we must keep our eye on this word, "freedom." In the Exodus, God freed the Israelites from slavery to Pharaoh. In the new Exodus brought by Jesus, we have all been freed from slavery to sin and death so we can be reconciled with God as his holy people. This all might sound a bit extreme . . . it is not!

Both the Exodus from Egypt and the New Exodus in Christ are freedom parties. Yet, we preachers know that what the Bible means by freedom has nothing to do with political or even social systems. Karen Engle Layman (no relation!), a Methodist pastor in Pennsylvania, once wrote:

"Freedom is a word tossed about a lot in the United States. We tout freedom of speech, assembly, press, and religion, and even the right to bear arms. As children of the enlightenment, we believe all people have an inalienable right to freedom. We take it for granted. But in spite of our affirmations about freedom, we argue over what these freedoms mean and to what extent we are free to exercise them. Individual freedom and the rights of the autonomous self to make decisions often conflict with the human community. For instance, we struggle with the freedom of journalists to write and to keep sources secret, and year after year we haggle over prayers in public places, and the NRA and handguns.

Apparently, despite our assertions about freedom, the term confuses us. When I read Galatians 5:1 to the laity in my Bible study, they said, "What on earth does that mean?" They found the statement perplexing. Perhaps we are confused when we read "For freedom Christ has set us free" (Gal 5:1) because Paul means something very different.¹

Layman notes that, according to the Anchor Bible Dictionary, in the Greco-Roman world the Greek word for "freedom," *eleutheria*, and the Latin word, *libertas*, meant basically 'doing whatever one wants.'

This is probably pretty close to how many of us would define freedom, at least until we had a few minutes to reflect on it. For "doing whatever one wants" is definitely not the biblical meaning of freedom. Hans Kung wrote, "The illusion of freedom is to do what I want. The reality of freedom is to want what God Almighty does." Paul wrote, "Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom" (2 Cor. 3:17).

Freedom from . . .

In nearly all biblical contexts, freedom is liberty as opposed to slavery. Thus, the OT speaks of freedom from bondage in Egypt, God's great act of salvation. It is vitally important to remember that the giving of God's Law at Mt. Sinai came *after* the Exodus. God chose the Israelites and freed them from slavery *before* God gave them the Law. If you bear this in mind, it will help you to understand why the Jews have never believed that they could earn their way into God's good graces by keeping the Law. They had already experienced God's grace in the Exodus. For an Israelite, it was now a matter of staying in God's grace-created

¹ from Karen Engle Layman's reflections on Galatians 5:1-15 in the July 2000 issue of *Interpretation* journal.

community, not getting in. This meant keeping the Law, especially those very visible markers, such as circumcision, Sabbath observance, and the food laws that set the Israelites apart from the world around them.

But it is also true that the Law was accompanied by blessings and curses; blessings that would flow from keeping the Law (living rightly with God and one another) and curses, such as exile, that would fall on the Israelites when they did not love as they should.

Who is surprised that things go well when we love well and things go badly when we do not? Sadly, the story of Israel is much more about the curses than the blessings. Why? Because the Israelites were unable to keep the Law. Sure, they could get their children circumcised and avoid pork, but truly love God and neighbor? That was as difficult for them as it is for us.

Why can't we love as we should? For Paul, one explanation² is that we are enslaved to powers that hold us captive (see Galatians 4:8); slavery to these powers is fundamental to the human condition. It is this slavery that explains why we and our world are so messed up. We are slaves to Sin, which Paul speaks of as a cosmic power in 3:22. We are unable to do the simple acts of loving God and loving neighbor each day and in every way.

But we have been freed from this slavery by the faithfulness of Jesus Christ. It is Christ who has freed us and not we ourselves. It is Christ who has defeated the enslaving powers. It is Christ who has taken upon himself the Law's curses. By his faithfulness all the way to his unspeakable death on a Roman cross, it is Christ who has defeated sin and, hence, death. In that last Passover meal with his disciples, Jesus spoke to them of a New Exodus, one which would lead them from sin to a New Covenant with God.

The New Covenant

Though the Israelites cherished God's law and kept the stone tablets in the Ark of the Covenant, they proved unable to live as God had taught them. They proved unable to live in right relationship, truly loving God and loving neighbor.

Nonetheless, God, through the prophet Jeremiah, promised his people that the day would come when his Law, his instruction to them, would no longer be written on the tablets of stone given to Moses, but on the very hearts of his people. God's people would no longer even have to teach other about God, for they would all know God. This would be God's new covenant with his people.

Which brings us to Jesus. Symbols can be emotionally powerful, sometimes enormously so. Jesus ate with the oppressed and despised to demonstrate that all persons were welcome in the coming of God's kingdom. He healed the sick to demonstrate that in God's kingdom the lame would walk and the blind would see. When Jesus came to Jerusalem for Passover Festival in the days before his death, he went to the temple overturning tables and invoking, in words and action, Jeremiah's judgment on the temple system. In sharing the Passover meal with his disciples, Jesus would reshape cherished Jewish symbols and hopes, applying them to himself and his ministry.

²This is not the only explanation we find in Paul, but it is key to understanding what he means by slavery and freedom.

Jesus had come to Jerusalem a few days before, entering the city as a returning king, to waving palms and chanting crowds. Because of the large crowds in Jerusalem for festival, Jesus and his disciple had stayed in Bethany, a “suburb.” Now, after sundown on Thursday, the evening of his arrest and trial, Jesus gathered his disciples together so they could share the Passover meal within the city walls.

The Passover meal was eaten by a family. On that early spring evening in Jerusalem, Jesus and the twelve disciples make up the family. The head of the household would offer thanks for the “bread of affliction,”³ (Deut 16:3). Now, Jesus identifies the bread with himself – with his suffering for his disciples. The Passover lamb was seal of the covenant between God and his people, a covenant that had been written on tablets of stone. But now, Jesus reminds his disciples of the new covenant, to be written on hearts, which had been promised centuries before in the scroll of Jeremiah. Jesus is the “mediator of a better covenant . . . enacted through better promises” (Hebrew 8:6), a covenant sealed with Jesus’ own blood.

And so we share this feast of the new covenant, this reshaping of the Passover meal around our Lord. And the question before us all is this – what will we do with the freedom God purchased at so high a price?

Freedom for . . .

Jesus Christ has freed us to new life. How does God hope we will use our God-given liberty? To put a slight twist on it, we are free to do whatever we want, but only so long as our wants are God’s wants. And what does God want? Simple: love God and love neighbor. That’s what God wanted from the ancient Israelites. That’s what Jesus came to preach and to live out in his willingness to lay down his life for us. That’s what God does and that’s what God wants. As Paul puts it, in Peterson’s rendering, “Rather, use your freedom to serve one another in love; that’s how freedom grows. For everything we know about God’s Word is summed up in a single sentence: Love others as you love yourself.”

Paul’s letters can seem pretty daunting at times. The writer of 2 Peter certainly found them to be so (2 Peter 3:15-16). But even Paul reads Scripture as a narrative with a plot, a plot in which he finds himself and these new Christian colonies he is starting and for which he is fighting. If we are going to understand ourselves and our world, we have to find ourselves in this story as well. It is in the larger story of God and his creation that we can find the true meaning of freedom and learn how God desires us to use the freedom he has given us.

Scott Engle’s Bible Classes

Monday Afternoon Class

Current study: *2 Corinthians*

Meeting on-line at 3pm Monday on Scott’s Facebook page. Search for “Scott Engle - St. Andrew UMC.”

Tuesday Lunchtime Class

Current study: *Acts*

³ God instructed the Israelites to use unleavened bread at Passover to remind them of their hasty departure from Egypt. Unleavened bread is bread made without yeast. It takes time for yeast to do its magic, making the bread rise.

Meeting at 12:00 noon Tuesday in person in Piro Hall and on-line on Scott's Facebook ministry page. Search for "Scott Engle - St. Andrew UMC".

About the weekday classes:

Join us whenever you can. Each week's lesson stands on its own. This is very "drop-in." Both classes are recorded and are available each week in my podcast at scottengle.podbean.com. They are also available on Apple podcasts and elsewhere. Search by "Scott Engle Bible Studies".

Scott's Sunday Class

This Sunday: *Digging Deeper: Cain and Abel*

Meeting on Sunday at 11:00 in Smith Worship Center and on Scott's Facebook page. Search for "Scott Engle - St. Andrew UMC."

Videos of all three classes are posted on Scott's YouTube channel. Search for "Scott Engle." These videos are posted as soon as possible after class.