

Free from Worry – Exodus 16.1-36

Team Talk 4

Introduction

(Recap and introduce the theme for this week) We have been looking at the theme of freedom in the book of Exodus, looking at how we can free from the past, free to serve God, be agents of freedom from injustice. This week we are going to look at how we can be free from worry.

After the talk on free from the past, someone came up to me and said that their problem was not the past, but the future. She was worried about the future. For many people this is the thing which is holding them back: anxiety about the future. For we all have things that cause us to worry.

(Different kinds of Worry) There is certainly a lot to worry about. All of us face difficult and demanding circumstances which are beyond our control. There are situations and sometimes whole periods of our lives where things don't seem to make sense.

There are personal anxieties: stresses at work, stresses at home, stresses with family, stresses at university, with friends, with neighbours, with finances, with our health, with exams, essays.

There are national and global situations to worry about: the economy, looming cuts, crime, the breakdown of community, injustice, inequality, global warming. These can feel too big and too far gone for us to do anything about them.

And on top of these situations there is the added worry that God often seems to be absent. We can feel like we are facing our problems alone – that God doesn't seem to be answering our prayers or intervening to bring about a solution.

(Do not worry) And yet God commands us not to worry. Jesus tells his disciples, 'Do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear.' Paul commands the Philippians, 'Do not be anxious about anything.'

God commands us not to worry, because worry weighs us down and stops us living fulfilled lives. It cripples our faith, distorts our perspective, and plagues us with doubts. It stops us being truly free.

- Nearly half million people in this country say that stress at work has reached the extent that it is making them ill.
- stress accounts for 11.5 million lost working days each year in this country.
- One in five visits to the doctor in Britain is due to stress.
- Financial stress accounts for 70% of all marriage breakups.

Worry damages our relationships, our work, and our relationship with God.

(Worry for the Israelites) The Israelites had lots to worry about. They were in a desert – they had no food, and there were a lot of them.

And you can see the effect of this worry on the Israelites. They've lost perspective – they start saying that they were better off in Egypt, where they think they ate pots of meat and all the food they wanted. This isn't true – but stress has altered their memories. It has affected their relationships - it has caused them to turn against Moses and Aaron who had liberated them from their slavery.

In this passage God does four things to help the Israelites to be free from worry, and these are three things that we can all do.

1. Remember the past

First of all we need to remember.

The Israelites worry because they've forgotten. They've forgotten that God performed great miracles to set them free from slavery in Egypt, rescued them from the Egyptian army, led them through the Red Sea, and turned bitter water into sweet water. They have forgotten God's power and God's consistent care for them.

And we worry when we forget – when we forget what God has done in the past, in the Bible and in the lives of his people throughout the centuries, and what he has done in our lives.

The theologian Karl Barth declared, 'Stress is unbelief.' It is what we do when we forget God.

(Personal example) I used to have weekly crises with essays at university. I would go through the same cycle each week, believing that I could do the essay without God's help, getting close to the deadline in a panic, feeling really stressed, crying out to God for help, getting inspiration and energy just when I needed it, and then feeling very pleased with myself for writing such a good essay, trying to do the next one by myself, getting stressed when I couldn't do it, etc, etc. Each time I would get stressed because I had forgotten God's ability and willingness to help me.

God commands Moses to take jar, fill it with manna and put it on display as a constant reminder for the Israelites. He does this so that they might remember, so that whenever they started to worry about whatever situation they might get themselves into they could look at the jar full of manna and remember that God provided for them and will do so again.

(Ways we remember) Remembering what God has done for us is the first step in overcoming worry. And we remember by thanking God for what he has done for us, focussing our minds on God's power instead of our circumstances, by reading the Bible, remembering God's acts of power and kindness to his people, by telling stories to one another, reminding each other of God's kindness to us.

(Example) At Focus this year it was announced that they needed £250,000 to fill in the shortfall and it was raised in one collection. This should be a daily reminder of God's power and ability to provide for us at St Peter's and we must not let ourselves forget it.

2. Focus on one day at a time

First, we need to remember. Next, we need to focus on one day at a time.

(Taking a day at a time) Moses commands the Israelites not to keep any manna for the next day. Each day they are to collect what they need for that day. He is trying to ensure that they don't get ahead of themselves by worrying about the next day. They are to focus on what they need for that day only.

Jesus would later say, 'Do not worry about tomorrow, for each day has enough trouble of its own.'

A lot of worry comes from worrying about the future. There is nothing wrong with forward planning – which is a good and necessary thing to do. But we are not to worry about the future.

(Unfounded worries) This is partly because many of our worries will be unfounded.

Winston Churchill said, 'when I look back on all these worries, I remember the story of the old man on his death bed, who said that he had had a lot of trouble in his life, most of which never happened.'

Mark Twain similarly said, 'most of my disasters never happened to me.'

(Acting in the present) But more than this, we shouldn't worry about the future because today is the only day we can do anything. We can only ever act in the present.

C. S. Lewis said that a lot of the time we ask ourselves 'what is going to happen?' when we should be asking ourselves, 'what should I do?'

Archie Coates has a very good practice, which is that he has his 'worry list' of unresolved issues, and each day he asks God, 'is there anything on any of these that you want me to act on?' If there is he acts on it, and if there isn't he decides not to worry about them.

We need to take one day at a time, asking God what we need to do that day, and leaving the rest in God's capable hands.

3. Embrace Simplicity

We need to remember God's acts of kindness, focus on one day at a time. Thirdly, if we want to be free from worry we need to embrace simplicity.

(Having more than we need) According to Richard Foster, author of *Celebration of Discipline*, 'Simplicity is freedom.' He says that stress and worry come from craving things that we don't need, from storing up wealth for ourselves, trying to keep up with the lifestyle that others seem to have – the same clothes, phones, holidays, houses, cars. But all these things actually add to our worries.

In verse 16 God commands the Israelites, 'Each one is to gather as much as he *needs*.' They were told only to collect what each *needed* for each day. And those who tried to collect more than they needed are rebuked.

In other words, God is commanding the Israelites to live simply, according to what they need, and no more.

This is because the more we have, the more we have to worry about.

Soren Kierkegaard wrote, 'riches and abundance come hypocritically in sheep's clothing pretending to be security against anxieties and they become then the object of anxiety.'

(Giving things away) This is why much of Jesus' teaching centres on giving things away – because that is where we experience freedom from anxiety. The less we have, the less there is to worry about.

(Personal example) Giving is always a struggle, but in my experience it always produces a feeling of freedom, because it puts us even more in God's hands, and breaks the power of our possessions.

(Simplicity of heart) But it is more than simplicity of lifestyle and possessions that brings freedom from worry. We need a simplicity of heart. Worry comes when we start to focus on the wrong things. Jesus says that the best way to avoid anxiety is to 'seek first the kingdom of God.' When we have this simple aim in life, all our other worries are put in perspective.

4. Take time to Rest

We need to remember what God has done for us, take each day at a time, embrace simplicity, and fourthly, we need to take time to rest.

God commands the Israelites to take the Sabbath as a day of rest and not to collect manna on it.

The reason he does this is because resting combats stress.

(Benefits of rest) Rest is good for us physically and mentally. But more than this rest gives us perspective. When we rest we are reminded that life is not all about work. It gives us space to enjoy our friends and family. It broadens our outlook.

(Resting in God) Gary Haugen the president of International Justice Mission, says that they start each day with thirty minutes doing nothing. They simply reflect on their anxieties, pray and prepare for the day.

Rest is more than just time off; it is an attitude of our minds in which we rest in God.

Paul writes to the Philippians, 'Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.'

This is true rest.

(Personal example) The other day I went to bed with a lot on my mind and as a result had a restless night's sleep. I woke up worried and stressed about everything that I had to do, but I had this verse from Philippians in my mind, and so I wrote out a 'worry list' of everything on my mind, and went down the list giving each item to God and making them his responsibility.

Bill Hybels, the American church leader, suggests we create a daily 'finish line' for ourselves. He himself works from 6am to 4pm, then he says 'my meeting parade halts, my computer is shut down, and my assistant is bid a fond farewell. It is my day's finish line and I protect it vigorously.'

Having a finish line like means we have to say to God, 'I will try to do what I can do in the time that I have, but it is up to you to do the rest.'

(Sense of God's presence) Rest also gives us a heightened sense of God's presence. The Psalmist says, 'Be *still* and know that I am God.' In other words, when we stop, when we rest, we become more aware of God with us. When we rest we are reminded that it is not our efforts that bring us what we have, but ultimately everything is a gift from God.

Conclusion

(God provides) There will always be things to worry about. Our circumstances will always include things out of our control and beyond our ability to solve them. We will always feel stretched in some area of our lives. Being free from worry won't come from eliminating these circumstances and gaining control of every element of our lives – it will come when we remember who God is and what he has done for us. Just as he fed the Israelites each day in the desert, so he will also sustain us each day, giving us what we need when we need it. For our God is a God who provides for us. All we have to do what we need to do each day, live simply and rest in him.