

Free to Worship: Exodus 32-33

Team Talk 6

Discussion suggestion: what is going on when we sing together on Sundays/team nights?

Read Exodus 32.1-8 and Exodus 33.7-11

Introduction

(Recap on this term) This is our last team night of a term looking at the book of Exodus and the theme of Freedom. We've looked at Moses' calling and his efforts to liberate the Israelites from the hand of Pharaoh. We have seen how God provided for the Israelites in the desert and called them to live lives radically different from the people around them. We have explored how freedom involves dealing with our pasts, finding the calling for which we were made, being agents of freedom in a world full of injustice, being free from worry and anxiety, and freedom through living lives of radical obedience.

(Freedom and Worship) This evening we are going to look at Worship and Freedom. For worship is perhaps the most important way in which we can each experience freedom.

(Definition of worship) Worship is much more than singing on a Sunday. Paul tells the church in Rome, 'offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God – this is your spiritual act of worship.' And he explains that this means no longer conforming to the patterns of the world, but being transformed.

William Temple, Archbishop of Canterbury during the Second World War, defined worship like this:

Worship is the submission of all of our nature to God. To worship is to quicken the conscience by the holiness of God, to feed the mind by the truth of God, to purge the imagination by the beauty of God, to open the heart to the love of God, to devote the will to the purpose of God.

(Worship as a lifestyle and worship as an activity) Everything we do should be characterised by worship, but we have specific times of worship on Sundays and team nights when this is our whole focus.

William Temple puts it like this: 'All life ought to be worship; and we know quite well there is no chance it will be worship unless we have times when we have worship and nothing else.'

So we have worship on a Sunday and at Team Nights, times when we are doing nothing but worship, in order that the rest of our lives might be worship too.

And it is this focussed activity of worship that we are going to look at this evening.

(Personal story of feeling free while worshipping)

People often express that they feel so free when they worship.

Why is this?

(Worship is what we were created to do) The first reason is that worship is what we were created to do. We are most truly free when we are most truly ourselves. And we are most truly ourselves when we worship.

(Worship makes us like God) The second reason is that God is free and you become like what you worship. When you spend lots of time with someone you start to pick up their habits, you start imitating them. And when we worship God we imitate God. And God is free, so when we worship God we experience freedom.

And yet worship can be a real struggle.

(Personal struggles when worshipping)

(Struggles of worship) Worship can be a real struggle. Maybe for some more than others, but for all of us there are distractions. You find yourself absorbed by worries or things you have to do; you find your mind wondering, you start looking at everyone around you – what they are doing. You start thinking about the band and the style of the music.

(How?) How can we experience that freedom in worship.

Here in Exodus we find two stories of worship. One where the Israelites get it very badly wrong, and one in which Moses and Joshua get it very right. Chapter 32 shows us how not to worship, and chapter 33 shows us how to worship.

1. Worship face to face

First of all, worship needs to be done face to face with God. Worship is about entering the presence of God and coming face to face with God.

(Moses and the Golden Calves) Moses gets worship right because he meets with God face to face. The Israelites go wrong because they put something in the way of God. They do not feel like they can engage with God directly and so they make two golden calves. These were designed to be symbols of their God. But they were not God himself.

We go wrong in our worship when we get caught up in the things that are between us and God, when we focus on the style of music or start thinking about whether we like this song or not. We start focussing on whether it is too quiet or too loud.

(Choice) Freedom in worship comes when we make a simple choice. When we decide to meet with God, whatever our context or personal preferences in terms of style of worship, when we choose to focus on God and on engaging with him.

(Presence of God) For worship is about entering the presence of God, meeting with him, speaking to him as we would a friend. It is about a personal, intimate relationship with our Father.

And it is the fact that we can meet with God face to face in worship which makes it so liberating. For freedom is found through a relationship with God. Freedom comes from knowing that we are loved unconditionally – and this is what we experience as we worship God – his total love and total forgiveness, which bring freedom.

2. Leave the safety of your tent

Secondly, we experience freedom in worship by leaving the safety of our tents.

(Israelites and their tents) In chapter 33 it says that anyone could go to the tent of meeting, but when Moses and Joshua would go there, the other Israelites would stand at the entrances of their tents. They appear to hold back and stay where it is safe. But in order to meet with God we need to leave the safety of our own tents.

Why did they stay at the entrance to their tents when they could meet with God face to face? Perhaps there were things they needed to look after – children, or the cooking, or

some work they were in the middle of. Or perhaps they were worried about what would happen in the tent of meeting, so it was safer to stay where they were.

So they stand and watch from a distance instead of going to meet with God face to face.

(Movement) Worship involves movement. For much of the Old Testament worship would have included pilgrimage – a literal moving away from one’s home and going to the temple in Jerusalem to meet with God. We need to do the same when we worship – we are moving into the very presence of God.

(Worshipping together) It means coming together. Worship is a corporate as well as an individual activity. Instead of us each standing at the entrance to our own tents, we come together. This can be uncomfortable as it means that we can’t just do our own thing in our own way. We have to wait for one another and listen to one another and accommodate one another. But as we worship together, God unifies us. Richard Foster says that as we worship ‘there is a divine melting away of our separateness.’

(Leaving our tents) And it means leaving behind our own tents. Movement always requires us to leave things behind. And in worship we leave behind our own personal concerns and worries – the things we are in the middle of. We choose to let go of our daily concerns and focus on God.

(Change of focus) This doesn’t mean that we pretend that everything is ok if it is not. It is not about pretence. Rather it is about a shift in our focus. We change the direction that we’re looking. Instead of looking in and around, we are looking up. The goal of worship is to take us from a position in which we are consumed by ourselves and our circumstances, to a position where we are fully absorbed by God and his greatness.

The Catechism of the Catholic Church says, ‘The worship of the one God sets man free from turning in on himself, from the slavery of sin and the idolatry of the world.’

This makes worship so liberating, as we are freed from our own worries and we suddenly get the perspective of a big God who loves us and holds the world in his hands. We are reminded of God’s power and kindness – his desire to change things and his ability to change things.

3. Refuse to leave God’s presence

So to experience freedom in worship we need to meet with God face to face, leave behind our own tents, and thirdly we need to refuse to leave God's presence.

(The Israelites' impatience) The Israelites go wrong because they give up waiting. Moses goes up the mountain with Joshua and they are waiting to see what God has to say to them, but they give up waiting and so they make a couple of idols to fill the time.

(Joshua) Compare this with Joshua. Exodus 33.11 says that after speaking with God face to face, Moses would return to the camp, but Joshua would not leave the tent. He would refuse to leave. If you wonder why Joshua was the person to succeed Moses as leader – this may well be the answer: because he would refuse to leave God's presence.

(Patience) Worship requires patience.

(Personal experience of lack of patience in worship) One of the main obstacles for me with worship is a lack of patience. If I don't find myself engaging immediately I decide it is not going to happen today so I give up.

However, worship requires us to wait on God. The Psalms repeatedly include phrases about waiting on the Lord.

So we persevere in worship, allowing time to enter God's presence, not rushing, but taking time to soak in him.

(Remaining in God's presence) And then we need to refuse to leave God's presence.

Worship can feel shallow or false when it has no connection with the rest of our lives, when we sing things that we don't live as soon as we've left church. For worship to be truly liberating it has to be authentic. It has to match the rest of our lives.

And this means staying in God's presence when we've stopped singing.

When we've finished singing on a Sunday we need to make the decision to continue in God's presence for the rest of the week.

A few verses later Moses says to God, 'If your presence does not go with us, do not send us up from here.' He's refusing to go anywhere or do anything with God being with him.

(Personal example) I have an older brother, and for most of my childhood I would just follow him around. It must have been really annoying for him, but I just decided that I would not leave his presence.

This is how we need to be with worship. When we stop singing we need to continue walking with God, listening to God, seeking to serve God in everything we do. We need to tell God that we're not going anywhere without him.

Conclusion

(Being freed to worship) There is an old chorus with the line, 'Set my spirit free that I may worship thee.'

We have been talking about how we can experience freedom *through* worship – by engaging with God face to face, leaving behind the things on our minds, by waiting on God and refusing to leave his presence. But we need God's help to worship. We experience freedom *through* worship, but we also need to be freed *in order to* worship.

The message that Moses gave to Pharaoh from God was this: 'let my people go, so that they may worship me.' They needed to be freed to be able to worship.

And it is the same with us. That is why we often pray before we worship – because we need God to free us to worship. It is a work of the Spirit. Paul, writing to the Philippians, refers to 'we who worship by the Spirit of God.' We need the Spirit to free us to worship. We need him to free us from our distractions, feeling self-conscious, feeling distant from God – and ask him to come close to us, to speak to us, to encourage us and transform us.