

LIVING FREE - Week 14

Monday, September 6

Growing up I had a birds-eye view of only a couple of men. First, of course, was my father. He was reserved and faithful. His own father had taught him how to work and how to work hard. He was not particularly open or expressive with me or my brothers. He was the most honest man I have ever known well, but he did not really know how to speak into my life. Then there was my grandfather. He was engaging and fun. He is the man that taught me mechanics and fishing. He taught me a love of sport and games. He did not finish high school, but he was very bright. He had achieved a high level of success in business, but he was always down to earth. Getting older, God brought a number of other important men into my life. William Savoy taught me a love of scripture and theology. Billy Neely—I lived in the Neely home while I was a youth pastor in North Carolina—taught me love for family and for Christ. Now, as we read the book of Numbers, while Aaron is the most gifted of the three children of Amram and Jochebed, Miriam was the brightest and most passionate. Moses was the youngest. He was not the smartest or most enjoyed member of the family. He was steady and faithful. He would not be the person you would be drawn to as a leader, but over the long haul, because of his faithfulness, he is the one you would want to be in charge.

Here is what we are told about him:

Now the man Moses was very meek, more than all people who were on the face of the earth. - Numbers 12:3

To understand the journey of Israel in the wilderness, we need to know the man, Moses. Much of his story we know, but some of it remains surprising. Yes, we know he was put into a basket and placed into the Nile River to protect him from the death edict of Pharaoh. Pharaoh had become concerned that the Hebrews were growing in number. He needed their slave labor, but Pharaoh was also concern that with their numbers increasing, they could rise up against him. He planned to have the baby boys killed after birth, the way Herod called for the babies in Bethlehem to be killed when he heard that a Jewish king was to be born there. Moses survived and was raised as a child of the daughter of Pharaoh. But this was a position he ran from when he murdered a slave master one day. It seemed like he would blend into the desert and be lost forever, but the Lord appeared to him there. God called him to bring the people out of bondage to freedom, to take a group of disconnected tribes and form a new nation, one like no one had ever seen.

Here is what the Lord says about Moses:

Hear my words: If there is a prophet among you, I the LORD make myself known to him in a vision; I speak with him in a dream. ⁷Not so with my servant Moses. He is faithful in all my house. ⁸With him I speak mouth to mouth, clearly, and not in riddles, and he beholds the form of the LORD. Why then were you not afraid to speak against my servant Moses? -Numbers 12:6-8

Now, when the Lord gives you an endorsement like that, what more do we need to know? What God says is that Moses' humility made it possible for Moses to get as close to the Lord as a man is able to. He doesn't need to come to Moses in his dreams. The two can talk, really talk. This is what is needed for the leader of the people, someone that can boldly go before the Lord and intercede for the people. Yes, we look at his life and we see a faithful judge of the people, a protector of the Law of God. We see a liberator and someone willing to expend himself to lead the people and to serve God. But we need to be careful not to idolize Moses. He had his failures and weaknesses. If we look at his story, we see him complaining to God. We see him depressed and weary over the calling that he has received. We see him despairing. We see him lose his faith in the people. We see him lose his temper and forget his mission. We see him lose his opportunity to enter into the land. He shows himself faithful over and over again, but he also needs a redeemer. He is not the messiah. He cannot save the people. Indeed, he is one of the people. He is made of flesh, like we are. Actually, in the text I

read today where Moses is called the most humble man on the face of the earth, there is an echo of the words of Genesis. The word for dirt or earth in Hebrew is the word *Adamah*. Yes, that is where Adam gets his name. His name means earth or soil or dust. That same word is used for the word earth in our verse. The verse helps us harken back to the first man. Moses is also made from the dust of the earth. He is a man like you and like me. In the Hebrew bible he is five times called a man, sometimes a man of God, but a man nonetheless.

This is what I had to learn about the men in my life. They taught me much of life, and there are many men and women that continue to do that, but they are made of the earth. In small ways they point me to the Lord Jesus himself. The God that has come to us in human flesh. I am thankful to learn from Moses and from so many other leaders that reveal to me the character of God. At the same I remember that each of them, Moses included, needs redemption. Who has taught you about life and pointed the way to Jesus?

Let's pray:

My Shepherd God, thank you for men like Moses that reveal the path of humble service. Thank you for bringing into my life men and women that have pointed me to you. Remind me each day that I have a redeemer in Jesus. Open my eyes that I might learn your ways through the power of your Holy Spirit. I pray in your name. Amen.

Tuesday, September 7

One of the surprises of arriving at the Granada Church building is that, on occasion, there will be a plastic bag left on the front steps or at an entrance to the building. I remember discovering such a bag years ago for the first time and wondering what it was and why it was there. I opened the bag to see the parts of a chicken that had been dismembered. I am trying to be creepy at this point. This really happened, and it still does on occasion. There are people in Miami that practice santeria occult rituals in our community. They often sacrifice animals and then leave those animals in area cemeteries or at area church buildings. They believe by doing so they can gather up some of the spiritual power of those places and add that power to their special prayers. These matters seem strange to us today, but in the ancient world, ritual animal sacrifices were a common way to curry favor with deities. They were a means of getting the attention of the gods and getting them to act on your behalf. Now, we have to be careful that when we read the Old Testament, we believe the same thing about the sacrifices that the Lord commanded his people to make. It is a bit surprising how often their sacrifices are mentioned in scripture. The surprise for me is that, after the book of Leviticus gives a very detailed explanation of each sacrifice and offering the Jewish people were commanded to offer, the book of Numbers repeats those same instructions. Both of these books came from Moses. So, why did he need to repeat the instructions once again?

Here is one of those places in the book of Numbers:

The Lord spoke to Moses, saying, ² "Command the people of Israel and say to them, 'My offering, my food for my food offerings, my pleasing aroma, you shall be careful to offer to me at its appointed time.' -Numbers 28:1-2

Here is what I believe God is doing by repeating these instructions. He is always placing his people in the story of sin and grace. Every human being lives in this narrative. We feel the need for justice when a wrong takes place, but we do not know what to do with what we are feeling. I remember a missionary, among remote tribal people, working with men from the village on a roof. There was an accident when a tool fell from the roof and hurt someone. Immediately, the entire village gathered at the place where the accident happened. The missionary watched as justice was carefully fulfilled. Payment had to be made for the injury. He then realized that everyone in the world has this sense that injustice must be confronted so that justice can be done. This is what God is showing his people. He is teaching them about the indelible nature of God's justice. There is sin. There must be a sacrifice. This is nothing like the sacrifices that santeria does here in south Florida. They are trying to leverage the spirits with power to get the things they want in life, sometimes healing, sometimes wealth or

success. The sacrifices the Lord commanded are about justice and maintain peace for the whole community.

Here's the second thing about those sacrifices. They could not actually affect true forgiveness. This is what we are told in the book of Hebrews in the New Testament:

But in these sacrifices there is a reminder of sins every year. ⁴ For it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins. -Hebrews 10:3-4

The writer of Hebrews is explaining what the sacrifices could do and what they cannot. They can provide an outward and ceremonial cleansing but never cleanse the heart or the conscience. A furry animal cannot take the sin of a human being. Instead, the purpose of these sacrifices was to prepare us for the coming of one that could truly take our place, Jesus our messiah. They point to the blood of our substitute, Jesus, who gave his life to cleanse us fully from the injustice of our sin. Now, today, while we know of the need for justice, we have forgotten what real justice entails. That is what the missionary learned when he saw the tribal leaders come together. They stood together and worked until they came to an agreement on the cost of the injustice and how the debt would be repaid. Today, unless we are watching a show about legal justice, the debt caused by sin is hidden away from us. For Israel, it was always before them, so they would understand their need and how God wired his justice and holiness into our world.

God's desire is for all to see that:

...we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all.

-Hebrews 10:10

Let's pray:

Holy God, you made us for justice and holiness. We know this in our bones, and when injustice arises, we feel it. We know something is wrong. Enable us to see Jesus and your plan, to see the way to forgiveness and life in this broken and sinful world. We pray in the name of the one that laid down his life for us. Amen.

Wednesday, September 8

When I was a young pastor, one of the members of my church was from an English background, and he married a woman from an Italian background. I remember this man telling me about the first year he had thanksgiving dinner with his wife's family. Before the dinner, there was a huge yelling match, one that seemed vicious in its intensity. But the family seemed to calm down enough to sit and have dinner together. But by the time dessert was over, an even bigger conflict erupted. Before he realized it, one family member had grabbed a knife and was chasing the other around the room. My friend told me that no one was injured. That night when he and his wife got back into the car, he told her, "I didn't think we were going to get out of there alive." More than once, he had been frightened enough that he thought about heading for the door. But his wife told him, "That's nothing honey. Thanksgiving is like that at my house every year!" Yes, for her hot-tempered Italian family that was the norm. Now, when we read about the journey of Israel in the wilderness, it was more like an Italian family than an English family. The people complained against God. They fought with each other. They easily became worked up and depressed. They easily gave up too! And, yes, wait for it: we see drama from the Lord as well. Do you remember how the Lord told Moses at one point that he was not going to go into desert with his people? He refused to go with them because he might destroy them on the way. Here is what the Lord said when the people followed the negative report of the spies and refused to go into the land:

And the Lord said to Moses, "How long will this people despise me? And how long will they not believe in me, in spite of all the signs that I have done among them? ¹² I will strike them with the pestilence and disinherit them, and I will make of you a nation greater and mightier than they." -Numbers 14:11-12

Now, folks, bible scholars and theologians explain to us that we have the wrong view of God. They call passages like this, anthropomorphisms, using human terms to speak of God. Well, they are right to say that we just do not have the language needed to describe God. But they are wrong to think that God is not passionate. The Lord loves and hates. He is patient, and sometimes his patience wears thin. He is forgiving and also, he will not clear the guilty. You see, we believe that the words of God do indeed reflect the character of God. God is not an impassioned observer, yawning as humans go about their business. He is locked with his people in a life-or-death struggle for their freedom and their salvation. This is our God. The one that sings over us. The one that sometimes snorts with anger over what we do. God can be called many things, but removed is not one of them. You see, by the end of the 17th century a philosophy, a theology about God began to be popular. It is the reigning view of many people today. It is called "deism." Deism teaches that, yes, God created our world. He got it spinning and set its systems in place, and then he let it all run on its own. He doesn't bother himself with how we are doing each day. He is removed and uninvolved in the drama of human life.

Now, when we see how scripture speaks of God, we can see that deism couldn't be further from the truth. The God of the Bible is always engaged. He has a dog in the fight you could say. Or, better, his Son is on the scene. God has, from the onset of creation, engaged with the world and with human beings. He made us in his image and began sharing fellowship with Adam and Eve in the garden. Not only is he present, he is also not silent. He bridges the chasm from eternity to us with his word. And yes, he entered into our world in human flesh. Indeed, the same passion you see in the Father, you see expressed in the Son of God. Jesus revealed the personality and character of God for us to see. And yes, God is engaged in the drama that is your life. We grieve his Spirit when we turn away from him. We enjoy his presence when we turn to him and take time to be with him. And passionate, don't get me started. Jesus went to the cross not out of obligation. He did so in joy. He faced the shame, dishonor and contempt of the cross for the sake of joy in the will of the Father and joy over bringing life to you. The drama of our redemption is the most heart-breaking, shocking and powerful drama in our world. This is why we speak of it as the passion of the Christ. And, you are in the story.

This reminds me of one of David's songs where he realizes he has been caught up in God's drama:

The LORD thundered from heaven; the voice of the Most High resounded. ¹⁴ He shot his arrows and scattered [the enemies], great bolts of lightning and routed them. ¹⁵ The valleys of the sea were exposed and the foundations of the earth laid bare at your rebuke, O LORD, at the blast of breath from your nostrils. ¹⁶ He reached down from on high and took hold of me... - Psalm 18:13-16

Don't you love that? Here the heavens are shaking. The very foundations of the earth are exposed. Yet, the Lord came down and took hold of David. This is the drama you are living in with God. He has come and laid his hand upon you. So again, yes, we can know the Lord is at work among his people because of his passion, his engagement, and pursuit of his people. This is the drama we live in each day, one filled with the presence of God. By the way, the creation cannot exist on its own. It is sustained by the Lord each moment. Without his care and power, we would cease to be.

Let's pray:

Almighty God and everlasting Father, we forget the story we are living in. Maybe it is because familiarity breeds contempt or it breeds boredom. Forgive us for living little lives, drained of passion. Show us Jesus afresh this day that we might learn life from him. For we pray in his name. Amen.

Thursday, September 9

Our son Nathan bears the same name as a great-uncle of mine named Nathan Benjamin McGuffey. We called him Ben, and he joined our family when he married my great-aunt

Margaret. I had the privilege of spending time with Ben and working alongside of him during my years in college. One thing I learned about Ben was that he was a visionary. He was always looking forward. There were many signs of this in his life. One sign was that he built and provided a home for each of his four daughters. He could see forward, and he knew they would have families of their own, so he made preparations far in advance of their need. Ben was a committed follower of Jesus, and he knew that his time was limited. He was always reaching for the most in life and preparing for the generations that would come after him. I find this same way of life in Moses. He along with Aaron and Miriam, his brother and sister, knew their time on earth was limited. They embraced life at the same time they knew their mortality.

In the psalm written by Moses, Psalm 90, we find these words:

Lord, you have been our dwelling place in all generations. ² Before the mountains were brought forth, or ever you had formed the earth and the world, from everlasting to everlasting you are God. ³ You return man to dust and say, "Return, O children of man!" ⁴ For a thousand years in your sight are but as yesterday when it is past, or as a watch in the night. -Psalm 90:1-4

Now, for the better part of my life, I read those words "return to dust, you children of men" as a complaint, maybe even a dig against God. Yes, I think it is true that Moses does not like the idea that his life will end, his mission will be fulfilled, and his body will return to death. But, knowing more about his life, I think what he says is more a statement of the reality of our lives. We are just passing through.

To help us understand, Moses then explains with an illustration:

...they are like a dream, like grass that is renewed in the morning: ⁶ in the morning it flourishes and is renewed; in the evening it fades and withers. -Psalm 90:5-6

He is speaking of the grass that could be seen in the desert. It has a life-cycle that lasts one day. The morning dew and the rising sun would cause the seed to send forth a shoot into the air. It would rise quickly through the day. But the scorching sun would kill the desert grass by day's end. As it was dying, it would drop the seed that would begin the process all over again the next day. Moses says, that while a thousand years for the Lord is like a day, our lives pass like the desert grass, so very quickly. Now, I'm not being morbid here. This is the truth of our condition. This is why we better have the Lord as our dwelling place. Everything is passing away, and the Lord alone will remain.

This is also the reason for this statement a few verses down:

So teach us to number our days that we may get a heart of wisdom. -Psalm 90:12

Yes, as short as our lives are, we must make the use of the time the Lord gives to us. That was the story of my uncle Ben. I remember he purchased a piece of land along a mountain ridge not too far from his house in North Carolina. He laid out the lots, sunk the needed wells for water, cleared the land, and put in the utilities. But one evening while at a worship service, he had a heart attack and was gone. Yes, he went from a worship service on earth, no doubt to a worship service in heaven. Return, O children of man.

Now, when we have that perspective, we are in a position to take our place among the generations that serve and honor God with every breath we have until we have no more. There's also no fear in Moses, nor was there in my uncle. They knew their dwelling place had always been found in God. Now as I read this, I wonder if we have that sense of mission, a sense of purpose for the years and days that the Lord has given to us. We are told that Moses also returned to the Lord. He wasn't in the land the people were soon to reach, but he could see into it from the top of a mountain. It must have been a beautiful sight, and the reminder of the turning of the generations and how each of us is called to fulfill our calling, our mission from God in the days that he provides to us. Then God will extend that work to the next generation that is coming. This perspective for us is healthy. It shows us that we depend on

God for all things, that God has a continuing work, and that we need to be wise in the numbering of our days. Yes, God had the work going before we showed up, and he will continue to work out his purposes in Christ when the next generation comes along. We can be sure of that.

Let's pray together:

Lord God, we can have tunnel vision and think only of our own time. We forget you have been faithfully working in our world since the beginning, and that you will carry it forward to completion in Christ Jesus. Help us to trust in that, like a relay runner has to trust the others that will carry the baton in the race. Thank you for your faithfulness, O Lord, for we pray in the name of Jesus. Amen.

Friday, September 10

Ok. I looked it up. The United States criminal code has over 23,000 pages. Then, if you add on top of that the code of the various states, there are thousands more pages added. This is the criminal code and does not include civil law, and the thousands of pages more we have accumulated of various other federal and state regulations. I am already weary just hearing about it. Now, of course, we roll our eyes and think that everything could be, should be simpler, and maybe it can be. But by its nature, law and the application of justice is bound to be complex.

The book of Numbers ends surprisingly with a return to a legal question brought up earlier in the book, about whether female family members can inherit land, and in what circumstances. You see, in Israel, God commanded that land remain with the tribes, so if a woman inherited the land and married someone outside her tribe, then the land would be included in the ownership of another tribe, one that God did not intend. So, the Lord told the inheriting women they could inherit their father's land, but they needed to marry someone from their own tribe. That would keep the land in the tribe as God planned. Ok, all these details. Then they really are necessary to get things right. Yes, it may surprise you that God takes time to make sure of that. Righteous and just laws are important to the Lord because Israel in her laws is to reflect the character of God himself. Now, that is something we need to learn about. The Law of any land will begin to take on the character of the lawgivers, the people that make the laws of the land. The unique thing about Israel is, their laws were not to be made by people that would have their own prejudices. They were received from God, the one beyond prejudice, the one that is no respecter of persons.

Here is how the book of Numbers ends:

These are the commandments and the rules that the Lord commanded through Moses to the people of Israel in the plains of Moab by the Jordan at Jericho. -Numbers 36:13

Yes, God gave them the law before they needed it. They received these instructions from the Lord before they set foot in the land. The Lord didn't want the people to make it up as they went along. God wanted them to have it when they needed it. Indeed, the people and Moses didn't make laws at all. They received the laws from the Lord himself. The equity and justice of God was received in the form of precepts that would be applied to everyone, whether of Israel, or a sojourner and alien in the land.

Here is our text for today:

"You shall not oppress your neighbor or rob him. The wages of a hired worker shall not remain with you all night until the morning."¹⁴ You shall not curse the deaf or put a stumbling block before the blind, but you shall fear your God: I am the Lord. ¹⁵ "You shall do no injustice in court. You shall not be partial to the poor or defer to the great, but in righteousness shall you judge your neighbor. -Leviticus 19:13-15

In a world where the poor or infirm might be trampled upon or treated differently because of their incapacities, here is the Lord teaching the character of his justice. This was nothing like

anyone had ever seen on earth at the time. It is a justice and righteousness that rivals our own. We think we are advanced people, progressive, and that we care for the least among us. God commanded his people to do this from the beginning. Here is the character of the Lord himself and how he values each person despite what a person's wealth or abilities may be. This is not from our world. Okay. There is one final thing I would like us to see. God gave his law to his people as the eternal law, as law woven into the fabric of his creation. Again, he didn't ask the people to make it up as they went along. It was a received law, not a conceived law. This impacted the way they viewed the law. Their goal in the years ahead as situations changed was not to make up laws they thought would fit, but to perceive the law of God, the eternal law, and to write it down as it applies in this moment and this time. Laws were not to be made up but received from the Lord himself as needed in history. It is this received law that shaped this nation, not perfectly for sure, but the sense that God is righteous in his ways, and his law is revealed to us in our world. We can know it and learn to apply it, and the result is justice for everyone. Rich and poor. Young and old.

Let's pray:

Thank you, O Lord, for the way you have ordered your world. Thank you for your truth and righteous, the lights meant to guide us as people. Teach us your ways, O Lord, that we might walk in your truth. Give us an undivided heart to worship and follow you. In the name of Jesus, we pray. Amen.

Saturday, September 11

Now, we have spent the last weeks walking with Israel in the wilderness. Why did God choose Israel? Yes, they were a stiff-necked people. Very slow to learn and high maintenance. God's purpose in choosing Israel was to show the world what a life of ordered freedom looks like. He chose a people that hadn't been formed into a nation, had no system of laws to guide their justice and no mission in the world. The Lord gave them all of that during their time in the wilderness. It was the way they would come to live free. God would guide them along each step of their journey.

Now this didn't mean it wouldn't be messy. It is always messy working with sinful people. But God's purposes would be revealed. In the story of Israel, we find the faithfulness and the persistence of God. Through rebellion after rebellion, God remained with his people. We also learn the love of God. The Lord continually poured life into his people. He provided for them what they would need in the wilderness. The question we might ask at the end of Numbers is: did they learn to live free? Perhaps, that is the question for us. Have we learned to live in the freedom we have been given in Christ?

In the New Testament, Paul told the church in Galatia:

It is for freedom that Christ has set us free; stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery. -Galatians 5:1

As we have learned in this study, freedom was given to Israel by God at the Exodus, but they had to learn to live in the freedom the Lord provided. That is where we are in Christ. Now, for Israel, this free life always seemed over the horizon, blocked by their sin and unwillingness to trust God, and to walk in the way he provided to them. For those of us in Christ, we have freedom from our sin, and because of that, freedom from the oppressive life of the law. The law is no longer our master threatening punishment and death. It becomes a source of truth that helps to teach us about the ways of God and to guide us along the way. But, if you are in Christ, you are free.

Here is Jesus explaining how we come to live free in him:

As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Abide in my love. ¹⁰ If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love. ¹¹ These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full. -John 15:9-11

Here is the remarkable thing we see in Jesus' words. There remains a structure for a free life, his commands. There is, however, no threat of punishment if we fail to obey. Instead, there is the power of his love at work in us. The engine of our freedom is the love of Jesus, and his commands do not enslave us. They actually free us. The end result is joy, his joy that is flowing through our lives, a joy that is full. I believe the Lord gave Israel structure for their free living in his law, but the power for that freedom would not come until Jesus appeared on the scene. There are hints to this truth all the way through the book of Numbers. Though God gave his people the structure they needed in the law, they could not obey. They continually missed their freedom because of weakness and sin. They refused to trust the Lord at the most important times in their story. Yes, God provided them with sacrifices for restoration, but the sacrifices were never complete. There were always more sacrifices that needed to be made. It is not until Jesus, the messiah, comes that sin is done away with for the people of God once and for all. That is what Jesus has done. That is why we are invited to live in his love and to discover the good purposes of his commands. They are meant for our joy and our freedom. They are meant to give us life and not take it away. Yes, Jesus has fulfilled that law that we might walk before him as a free people, living life as God planned for us in the beginning.

There is a story about Abraham Lincoln. One day he entered a town as a slave auction was taking place. A young woman was brought before the crowd for sale. Lincoln was stunned to think of what would become of her; he bid for her and ultimately won. After paying for her, he gave her her freedom. He released her and said, now you are free. She responded, *Can I go anywhere I wish?* He said, *Yes, you can go wherever you choose.* She said, *Then I choose to go with you.* Now, the story is likely legend, but it teaches us of this freedom that we have in Christ. Once he has set us free, free from our sin—he has cleared us of guilt and shame, free from the burden of proving ourselves, free from condemnation and the need to hustle every day to prove our worth and value; once he has done this, how can we not follow him? How will we not learn to live the new, free life that he has given to us. And, yes, we have the resources of forgiveness and love. We have been adopted into God's family, something that Israel could not even imagine.

His divine power has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of him who called us to his own glory and excellence... -2 Peter 1:3

This is what we have been given that we might live free.

Let's pray:

Lord God, why would we return to bondage, we who have been set free by the blood of Jesus? Teach us your ways, O Lord. Provide to us the full joy that comes from knowing Jesus and from remaining in him. Enable us, by your Holy Spirit, to enjoy all that Jesus has accomplished to the praise of your name. Amen.