

Attitudes Of Returning To Egypt

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I want to begin with a passage that perfectly illustrates what I am going to be talking about today. Please turn with me to Exodus 16. There are many stories in the Bible that make me wonder, “What were they thinking?” I am sure many of you have also had this reaction when reading your Bible, but the scripture we are about to read especially made me wonder, “What is going on in your head?” verses 2-3.

Exodus 16:2-3 Then the whole congregation of the children of Israel complained against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness. And the children of Israel said to them, "Oh, that we had died by the hand of the LORD in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the pots of meat and when we ate bread to the full! For you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger."

This scripture always baffled me. I would read this and think, “Why would Israel long to go back to slavery, to return to a place where they had been oppressed for 400 years instead of having faith in God?” And I think that is a fair question to ask.

Some people could be inclined to say, “If I were in their shoes, I would never have wanted to return to Egypt.” But in thinking about this scripture and how it could apply to us now, I was incredibly humbled. The same attitude that Israel demonstrates here is not far off from attitudes I have had. The same scripture that hit me as “I cannot believe they would ever do that” is an attitude that we can easily fall into on a regular basis.

Today we are going to look at a few instances in which Israel longed to return to Egypt. Along the way, we will bring out some points on how we are as susceptible to these attitudes today as they were back then.

The first attitude I want to talk about is from the passage that we just read. This is the attitude of comfort, instead of spiritual growth. Brethren, when Israel longed to go back to Egypt, they showed a lack of faith in God, choosing instead to revert to what they had built up in their minds as comfortable things; the pots of meat and the bread were both things of comfort to Israel were a complete fiction.

Now I am not the sharpest knife in the shed, and I am certainly no expert in slavery, but I have a feeling that slaves were not given the highest quality food to eat in large quantities. Israel put their faith in a lie that they had fooled themselves into believing instead of having faith in God. This lie was created in their heads because they longed for comfort.

This made me ask the question of myself, how many times have I chosen comfort over God? Whenever trials or tribulations knock at our door, we can foolishly just want them to be over as quickly as possible so that we can be comfortable, when we should be viewing these trials as opportunities God has given us to grow in spiritual knowledge and character. We can choose to just put our heads down and wait for comfort, but when we do that, we do not extract every possible lesson we can learn from the trial. In doing this, we take the same attitude that Israel took, an attitude of stagnation—never growing, never building on experiences God may have wanted us to go through, but remaining stuck at the same spiritual maturity level.

God wants us to make the most of the little time we have here on earth. Growth must occur every day, and the enemy of growth is comfort. Now, I am not saying that all comfort is bad, but when we are choosing to be comfortable over growing in godly character and faith, comfort has become the enemy of God.

Our next example of Israel longing to go back to Egypt is in Numbers 14:3. During this time, Israel sent out spies into Canaan to get a lay of the land. All but two of the spies came back and gave a report that the land was perfect, except for the fact that there was a group of giants there, amongst other things. Let us pick it up in verse 2.

Numbers 14:2-3 And all the children of Israel complained against Moses and Aaron, and the whole congregation said to them, "If only we had died in the land of Egypt! Or if only we had died in this wilderness! Why has the LORD brought us to this land to fall by the sword, that our wives and children should become victims? Would it not be better for us to return to Egypt?"

Once again, brethren, Israel chose to respond with a lack of faith, which is becoming a trend at this point.

But something that is interesting about this passage is the pushback that was given by Joshua and Caleb. Let us look at the same chapter, verses 7-9.

Numbers 14:7-9 And they spoke to all the congregation of the children of Israel, saying: "The land we passed through to spy out is an exceedingly good land. If the LORD delights in us, then He will bring us into this land and give it to us, 'a land which flows with milk and honey.' Only do not rebel against the LORD, nor fear the people of the land, for they are our bread; their protection has departed from them, and the LORD is with us. Do not fear them."

After they said this, Israel responded in the most appropriate and levelheaded way (I am just kidding). They called for both of them to be stoned to death!

There are many lessons we can try to pull from this scripture, but the big one that struck me is that freedom from slavery—the freedom that Israel had been praying for some 400 years—came with responsibility. Freedom from Egypt meant that Israel had to take responsibility for their obedience, trust, and faith. God was not just going to hand them the solution to every problem they faced on a silver platter.

Israel had a view of freedom that was just downright wrong. They thought freedom meant immediate comfort, no responsibility, and the right to resist God as well as His chosen prophet. They measured freedom by physical condition, not by godly character.

Reading how Joshua and Caleb were pleading to the Israelites to have faith, saying that God is with them and not the enemies, then hearing the response they got, it is clear that Israel was acting like an emotionally immature teenager. Israel wanted the reward without the responsibility. God was plainly showing them that the land was already theirs. They just needed to go forward and take it, but they did not want to put in the effort. Israel did not want the responsibility that comes with God's true freedom, the responsibility of faith and obedience.

This attitude is not just exclusive to the Israelites though. How many times has God given us the answers, given us what we needed, and all that was required of us was to go and take it, but we did not. We wanted the blessings without the work. Sometimes God puts us through trials but gives us a way of escape. But we can decide to stay in the midst of the trial instead of using the way of escape God gives us because it requires effort.

This is the same attitude that Israel is showing here. God gave Israel true freedom, gave them the direction and the tools that they needed to succeed, but Israel did not want the responsibility that came with that freedom.

Brethren, we have been given that same exact freedom. We must understand that there is an incredible responsibility that comes with it. Obedience, faith, and growth must be shown, or else we are just like that emotionally immature teenager I was talking about before who wants all the rewards without any of the work.

For our final point, I would like to turn to Acts 7:39. This is Stephen recounting the Israelites in Exodus while he was arrested and before the Jewish officials. Stephen is speaking about Israel's rebellion against Moses and God. Let us pick it up in the middle of his thoughts, in verse 39.

Acts 7:39-40 Whom our fathers would not obey, but rejected. And in their hearts they turned back to Egypt, saying to Aaron, 'Make us gods to go before us; as for this Moses who brought us out of the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him.'

One thing that struck me when reading these verses was, yet again, Israel resisting God. This time Israel allowed the fear of the unknown to overpower

their fear of God. Up to this point, it seems like God almost had to force Israel to have faith in Him because they just would not get it.

Jarod Ritenbaugh's sermonette several weeks ago brought up Exodus 14:15. "And the Lord said to Moses, 'Why do you cry to me? Tell the children of Israel to go forward. But lift up your rod and stretch out your hand over the sea and divide it, and the children of Israel shall go on dry ground through the midst of the sea.'" Again, the fear of the unknown took the front seat. Israel's resistance towards God and their stubbornness almost feels like they were trying to make God prove Himself to them. Ten miraculous plagues later and they still did not put their faith and trust in Him. But at the same time, this made me ask of myself, "How many times have I seen God work miracles in my life, but my first reaction during hard times was not immediate faith and trust in Him?"

The power of fearing the unknown is no joke, and we have to actively choose faith and trust in God.

Bringing it back to Act 7, how often have we been in the midst of a trial, not being able to see the light at the end of the tunnel, and instead of going to God, we fearfully stayed in stagnation? The growth we talked about before that we absolutely need to be a productive member of the Family of God cannot exist and will never happen if we choose fear over faith.

I want to emphasize that when we choose fear over faith, we are making a choice. Sometimes when fear takes over, it can feel like an instinct, just like what Jarod spoke about, "fight, flight, or freeze." But at the end of the day, if we opt into fear, we are choosing to opt out of faith.

Israel at the time made this choice. Even worse, Israel at some points made the choice to choose other gods over God, a choice they made out of the fear of the unknown because Moses had not returned on their timetable.

Let us pick it up again in Acts 7, but this time down in verse 51, where Stephen very plainly explains his position to the Israelite officials.

Acts 7:51 "You stiff-necked and uncircumcised in heart and ears! You always resist the Holy Spirit; as your fathers did, so do you."

Again, this was met with a level-headed and very open-minded response by the Israelites. That is a joke. We all know what happened to Stephen.

But this scripture encapsulates what we are doing when we choose the fear of the unknown over God. We actively make a choice to give into fear over having faith in God. We are resisting Him and His Holy Spirit.

What an example Stephen set for us! I am sure he could have been incredibly afraid of the ramifications of what could happen to him speaking so brazenly to the council of Jewish leaders, but he did not choose the fear of the unknown, of what could possibly happen to him after what he said. He chose faith in God, that whatever happened to him was for the best and according to God's plan.

Brethren, when given the choice, Israel longed to go back to Egypt. They resisted God instead of trusting in Him. And, we are incredibly blessed to have these examples written for us in the Bible, so we can attempt to not make the same mistakes our spiritual ancestors did.

Let us do our best to not choose stagnation, slavery, and fear, but instead choose growth, true freedom, and faith.