

March 22 & 23, 2025

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## In and Out of the Wilderness:

### *Matters of the Heart*

Exodus 7:20-25, Luke 16:19-31

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*<sup>8</sup>Yet, O Lord, you are our Father; we are the clay, and you are our potter; we are all the work of your hand. Isaiah 64:8*

We are the clay, God is the potter continually trying to shape our hearts, softening us.

We're in the book of Exodus through this Lenten journey. There are so many things in this book that we're not going to be able to unpack. So I invite you to go to our YouTube channel or to Spotify and look for our podcast, which is called "Trust The Story." This week, we'll be launching into all the different plagues and what's going on with all of that. Last week we unpacked this whole idea of relationship. God has heard the cry of the people and he's come to Egypt free the people. God starts a relationship with these Hebrews shaping it around gratitude which comes from joy. God wants worship out of gratitude, not out of fear or appeasement. But Pharaoh cannot grasp this concept, he is incapable of understanding any other kind of worship outside of fear and appeasement.

This week we're picking up on another theme that Pharaoh is going to struggle with, and if we're honest, we struggle with this as well. I'm going to start out with a warning, this sermon has a warning label on it, some of you might get frustrated, some of you might get angry. God is very clear in scripture of what God wants from us and God is going to reveal something we all know to be true but something that we all struggle with. I know that I do. It's really hard to write a sermon and then that sermon points right at me. But God is calling us and talking to us about our hearts. Like the Potter, trying to soften our hearts, trying to mold our hearts. And pointing out some uncomfortable truths along the way.

In this story of Exodus, God and Pharaoh are in a battle of. They're in a battle of two different world views. Farrah has a worldview, and God has a worldview. Pharaoh's worldview is one of empire – an empire of the wealthy, the powerful, survival of the fittest. That's what Pharaoh knows. Pharaoh knows empire. If you were to put this in the context of a nomadic tribe like the Israelites would have been in that time, this empire is going to take all the people on a nomadic journey and they're going to go from one place to the next, going to go from A to B and the strongest and the fastest are going to be in the front, they're going to get to their destination first. They're going to be the first to water and food. They're going to be the first in line because that's how Empire works and the most vulnerable among them would be left in the back. They'd be left behind, in the dust. In scripture, God is consistently clear on who those vulnerable people are. God lists these people. God says the vulnerable people are the refugees, the alien, the orphan, the widow, and the elderly. These people are always left behind because they can't keep up. There's actually a story in scripture where there's one tribe that's known for their battle tactics. What they would do is that they would see nomadic tribes moving around in their land, and they would scope them out and they would see the most vulnerable were in the back and this other tribe would then go and they would kill everybody in the back. This tribe had a name – the Amalekites. The Jewish people had a very specific and special name for the Amalekites. They actually called them those who have given themselves over to the dark.

When I was in college, during my sophomore year, I had to take a religion class and the professors would take that group on a two night field trip. We drove to the border of Mexico and stayed on the Texas side. During the day, we would drive over across to the Mexican side. There were international companies from all different kinds of countries that had come to Mexico and along the Mexican border towns and they would set up shop, they would set up manufacturing plants and they put the word out

to the Mexican countries – Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador, all of these countries. And the word was, come work in our factory - you'll make more in a single day than you would in a year elsewhere and you're going to be able to send money back to your families wherever they are. So these families were attracted to this and what they found was exactly the opposite. They didn't earn as much and they got stuck working there. There wasn't even enough money for them to actually get back home.

The one factory we toured made cassette tapes. You remember those things? I won't tell you the company name, but I had a lot of cassette tapes with this company's name on it. This particular factory would employ only women. And the reason why they did that is because they figured that women would put up with the conditions. And also that women had smaller hands because they were making these cassette tapes by hand. And not only that, they didn't have enough money to get back home. They had to form these little shanty towns and we toured them like we were on Safari. They were living in basically cardboard houses. This was my first experience of someone pointing out this is what empire looks like. And I vowed that I was never going to use that company's cassette tapes ever again. Now, that's Pharaoh's worldview, and that's what Pharaoh did. Did this to the Israelites and to his own people. That's how Pharaoh saw the world.

God is arguing a very different worldview, one that he tries to get Pharaoh to accept. But Pharaoh keeps hardening his heart. Pharaoh is not open to being molded. Like a Potter with clay, God's worldview is Shalom. If you've ever connected to that word, we may think of it as peace. Shalom or peace be with you. But it's actually a much deeper meaning. It's a big concept. Shalom means wholeness and health. Shalom means safety with this idea of permanent provision. If Shalom were to take all of its people on a nomadic journey through a land from this place to that place, Shalom would order its March in such a way that they would put

the most vulnerable in the middle. And they would put the strongest in the front and in the back. Because Shalom always knows that there are malachites that have given themselves over to the darkness of the dark side of morality. That's how Shalom travels. Shalom travels at the pace of the most vulnerable. This is the battle between God and Pharaoh. The focus isn't to get the Israelites free, because if God really wanted to do that right away, he would just go to the very last plague first which is killing the first born. God is trying to do something very difficult. God is trying to soften Pharaoh's heart in order for Pharaoh to change his worldview. Because if Pharaoh can change his worldview from empire to Shalom. God would have pulled off the biggest evangelistic event in the history of humanity. If God can turn Pharaoh then God turns the entire nation and the whole power of Egypt. No more empire. But even at the end of this whole episode, this whole conversation between God and Pharaoh and all the plagues, it does take that very last moment, that very last play where the first born is taken and in that moment, Pharaoh has a moment of weakness and he decides to let the Israelites go. But it doesn't last very long. Because Pharaoh's heart actually hasn't softened. He had a moment of weakness. Pharaoh only believes in empire. His default is empire. And so he sends his armies and himself to go get them. And they end up dying trying to get their empire back. Isn't that true of empire? Empire dies. Name an empire in the history of the world that still exists. They all die. New ones rise up. But they all die if you think of any of the civilizations in the history of humanity. Lots and lots of people try to build empires, but they always rise and they always fall. There's only one outcome for empire, and that is death. But guess what? Shalom lasts forever. Even in the middle of empire. Shalom lasts and after 1000 years after Moses, over 1000 years after Moses. And after the empire of Egypt and Babylon and Assyria and the Greek Empire, Jesus comes along and there's a new empire. You know what this empire is? The Roman Empire. So Jesus is living with a new empire. The Roman Empire. But Jesus does something different. Jesus doesn't do what Moses did.

Jesus doesn't go and confront Caesar. Jesus starts a movement within the midst of empire. Jesus puts it this way -he tells a story to his disciples about a man who is laying at the gate of a wealthy man. And this man has sores all over his legs, crippled and can't move, and the only way he survives is by digging through the trash that's been thrown in the street by this wealthy man, and he has to fight off the dogs in order to do it. And not only is he trying to fight off the dogs, he has so many sores on his body that the dogs are licking his sores. This is a hard story, Jesus. Don't tell us this story. Bring the sheep back. We like sheep. This man's name is Lazarus. Which in Hebrew means the one who God helps. So here's Lazarus laying at the foot of this wealthy man's gate, and Lazarus ends up dying of starvation. He doesn't even get buried. They just say the angels came and brought him up to Abraham. And then Jesus goes on to tell the story that the wealthy man dies, the wealthy man dies and he is buried. He's given all the religious ceremonies that anybody would at that time. But he finds himself in a very different place than Lazarus. He's in a place where he is tormented. And he sees off in the distance. He sees Lazarus with Abraham and he goes to Abraham and he shouts out to Abraham, saying, Abraham, send Lazarus to me to quench my thirst. Lazarus, the guy who was sitting at this gate where the wealthy man didn't even see him. His heart was so hardened he didn't even see him. And he's so arrogant that he tells Abraham to send that guy to quench my thirst. And Abraham replies by telling this person. You've had your empire, your whole life you've had your empire, how did that end up for you? Abraham says, empires fail, they always do, but Shalom has the last word. Jesus speaks truth in the midst of empire. Giving us handles along the way. Jesus gathers a whole group of people and starts this movement in his generation at his time of Shalom, a Shalom that was entered into the world way back in this dusty book that we don't even read anymore called Exodus. It is a consistent theme over and over again, but what it also consistent is that not everyone buys into Shalom. Empire is strong. Empire is tough. An empire eventually kills Jesus. Not everybody

buys into Shalom, and I think what's even more true is that even though we're truly committed to Shalom, we at times lean towards empire as well? I know I do. There are moments and times in my life when I find myself leaning into empire. I told you, this is a hard sermon - warning label, frustration, anger. You need to struggle with this and Exodus can do that to us. The Book of Exodus is hard. Exodus is basically a book on ethics. If you take any judeo-christian law, any judicial jurisprudence at all, it all derives from the book of Exodus, the ethical book.

Pastor Sarah next week is going to hit on the 10 Commandments. How do you get more ethical than that? Exodus may very well be the 1st and most influential book on ethics ever written. And this story calls us all out because I think God is still trying to get all of us to exit empire. God is still trying to call us to Exodus out of empire. Into the promised land of Shalom. And like that potter, God continues to soften our hearts. And we know this because we're in the season of Lent, and while we can reflect on all the ways that Empire seeks to kill Shalom and all the ways the Imaculites seek to destroy the most vulnerable among us, we know where we're going. We know that we're going to Easter. We're going to resurrection. We're going to witness again the biggest expression of Shalom in the history of the world. New life. New life for me, new life for you. New life for the most vulnerable among us. But let's lean into the warning label one more time because it is easy to point out the hardened hearts around us, history shows us that. History is very clear where the hard hearts are. I think the tougher question for you and I is to not point the finger out there but to self reflect on our own lives and ask the question - who is lying at our gates? What Lazarus do we not see? What Lazarus are we ignoring?