

# BELPRES CHURCH

## Golden Leashes

### Exodus 1

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Thank you guys for being here. Those of you who are in the room, those of you who are joining us online, thank you for doing what I said to do last week and recording the Seahawks game, or not caring about the Seahawks, but either way, you're holy people, so thank you for being here.

This fall, we're doing a sermon series called *Unleashed*, about how Jesus unleashes us from the things that hold us back from the life of courage and hope and joy and meaning and purpose that He wants to give us. What are the leashes that hold us back from that bigger life? But I think one of the questions this series raises is, do we want that more abundant life enough to actually let Him take those leashes off of us?

Because see, there are leashes that none of us like. You know, health or career or school or relationship problems. Nobody likes those kinds of leashes, right? Or maybe this week, anger and worry over the state of our country that's got us down. So those are leashes we don't like. But then there are the attractive leashes. You know, money, success, being well liked. Now those are good things, but good things can be leashes too that hold us back from the bigger, deeper, richer life that Jesus wants to give us. And they're the more dangerous leashes because they're golden leashes. And we actually kind of like them and we're not sure that we want to get rid of them.

It's sort of like how I deal with airports. So like if the recommendation is to get there two hours before, might as well just double that, right? So I can show up and be there early. And then I almost always keep my bags with me. And if someone says, you can check that, I'm like, I can. But I'm not gonna. That's a true statement. And then they say, oh, don't worry, it'll arrive at your destination on time. And I'm like, yeah, well, because I'm keeping it with me. But then I'm moving through the airport and I'm burdened and I'm weighed down and kind of hot as I'm trying to get around from place to place. I'm leashed, but it's hard for me to let go of it.

Well, last week, we talked about how in the Book of Exodus, God calls a man named Moses to lead the Israelites out of slavery in Egypt. Today, we're gonna go back a couple of chapters and look at how they got to Egypt in the first place. So, it says this, Exodus 1: "Now, Joseph and all his brothers and all that generation died, but the Israelites were exceedingly fruitful. They multiplied greatly, increased in numbers, and became so numerous that the land was filled with them." Okay, so in this culture, that is a way of saying they are blessed. Things are going very, very well. You know, stock market's up, 401K looks great, all that stuff. Things are going great.

Then a new king, to whom Joseph meant nothing, came to power in Egypt. "Look," he said to his people, "the Israelites have become far too numerous for us. Come, we must deal shrewdly with them, or they will become even more numerous, and if war breaks out, we'll join our enemies and fight against us." So they put slave masters over them to oppress them with forced labor. But the more they oppressed, the more they multiplied and spread. So the Egyptians came to dread the Israelites and work them ruthlessly. They made their lives bitter with harsh labor in brick and mortar, and with all kinds of work in the fields. In all their harsh labor, the Egyptians worked them ruthlessly.

So we're actually entering this story kind of in the middle. If you go back just a few pages to the end of Genesis, we discover that Joseph and his brothers went to Egypt because there was a famine in their land, and so they went to Egypt because Egypt had food, and their descendants multiplied and prospered until a new king came along, came to power, and made them all slaves.

Now there's a spiritual truth here. There's a really important spiritual truth here: the things we turn to for security can leash us. The things we turn to for security can leash us. They go to Egypt to get food to be secure, but they end up as slaves. So the question is, what's your Egypt? What do you turn to for security that ends up enslaving you?

There's the things we think of, right? Money, it's vital. We need it, we gotta have money. And it's not a bad thing, it's a good thing, but if we rely on it more than we rely on Jesus, then it can become a leash because we're then filled with fear and anxiety about losing it. Kids' activities are good things to help them develop, but if there's too many of them, that acts like a leash that keeps us from developing faith and family and community because we don't have enough time.

Dysfunctions fall into this category. Every dysfunction has a function, which is why we do them. So for instance, I am a recovering people pleaser, and the thing about people pleasing is it pleases people. Like it works. People like you, but then it becomes a leash because you're constantly worried about what other people are thinking of you, about you. But Jesus has been unleashing me from that people pleasing thing. And the proof is how frequently I seem to displease some of you. I'm free. Unleashed. I'm going to make you so unhappy, left, right and center, right?

Food, it's a good thing, but it becomes a leash if it's how we cope with stress. Comfort is good. A life without comfort is uncomfortable, but it can also be a leash if it keeps us from taking risks to make friends or be part of the adventure of God's rescue mission.

And then there's politics. Politics matters. It's important. But increasingly people find their identity and purpose and meaning in politics and get a sense of ourselves from politics. I know I'm a good person because I vote for all the, quote, right people. And we look to it to fix all of our problems and save us. But when we do that, we begin to see folks on the other side not as wrong, but as evil and as existential threats, which leads to bitter division and violence, which we've seen over the last couple of years where people across the political spectrum have been targets of violence, and which we saw just this week in Charlie Kirk being killed.

Now, whether you agreed with him or not, and we have both in this church, I think we're all agreed that murder is no way to deal with our differences. Which is all the more reason for us to keep trying to be the church we're trying to be here, and that our angry world needs. Not an echo chamber church, but a church with people from all over the world, with all kinds of different cultures, with all kinds of different political opinions, having relationship across difference through the power of Jesus. To show our world a better way, to help heal our nation, let's show the world that we can have relationship across difference because of the power of Jesus to bring us together.

All of these things that I've listed can be good things, but they can also become leashes, golden leashes, which are harder to cast off because we kind of like them. They do something for us. They're attractive. But the Book of Exodus shows us that God rescues us from the misery and slavery of serving anything in our life as more important than Jesus.

So, look at verse 14. It says, "They made their lives bitter with harsh labor in brick and mortar, and with all kinds of work in the fields, in all their harsh labor, the Egyptians worked them ruthlessly." Now, in the original Hebrew, the word that's used there, the same word is used over and over and over again, and it means *to serve*. So, a literal translation would be, "They made their lives bitter with serving in brick and mortar, and with every kind of serving. In every kind of serving, they made them serve." And it's kind of trying to make a point there by that repetition.

If we serve anything other than God, we're going to be a slave to it. The minute the Israelites get out of Egypt, they start serving other things like false idols and end up back in a different kind of slavery. So, whether it's money to feel secure, or being well liked to feel popular, or physical appearance to feel wanted, or relationship to feel loved, or a job to feel like you have value, it will let us down. We end up not feeling valued in our job, or our relationship ends, or we lose a bunch of money. And if we have these things, we're worried about losing them, and if we lose them, we're devastated. That is not freedom, that is slavery.

And this text shows us two things that help get us unleashed. And the first is this: cooperate with Jesus, not our leashes. As this text goes on, it says, "As the king of Egypt

said to the Hebrew midwives, whose names were Shifra and Puah, when you are helping the Hebrew women during childbirth, if you see that the baby is a boy, kill him. But if it's a girl, let her live." The midwives, however, feared God and did not do what the king of Egypt had told them to do. They let the boys live.

Then the king of Egypt asked them, "Why have you done this? Why have you let the boys live?" The midwives answered Pharaoh, "Hebrew women are not like Egyptian women. They are vigorous and give birth before the midwives arrive." I just love this. This is one of my favorite verses in the Bible. You Egyptian women, you know, frail, pasty little things. We Hebrew women, we're tough, right? Here's the point: even the strongest leashes can be broken when we refuse to cooperate with them.

The midwives are the most powerless people in this culture. They are slaves and they are women in a sexist world. And yet they outsmart the king of Egypt by refusing to cooperate with the leashes he's trying to put on the Israelites by having them kill all the boy babies. As powerful as he is, Pharaoh can't get his bondage done without the cooperation of the most powerless people.

And as powerful as some of the leashes we feel are on us, at some level they operate by our cooperation with them. And the midwives' refusal to cooperate breaks all those chains.

So, for instance, if it's social media that is adding to your anxiety and worry, and it is, make no mistake about it, it's adding to your anxiety and your worry, don't cooperate with it. Limit how much you look at it. To help sort of unleash our whole country from the bitterness that's dividing us, boycott the merchants of rage and fear in news and social media, some of it Russian disinformation anyway, designed to make us hate each other, and they are having a spectacular time doing it. The Russians are winning. So don't cooperate. Don't read, don't click, don't watch, don't listen. Put the merchants of rage and fear out of business.

If it's fears about money that's leashing you, give some of it away and discover that God provides for you, and that takes that leash right off of you. Cooperate with Jesus instead of what leashes you. Which brings me to the second way we become unleashed, and that is humbly rely on Jesus to unleash us, because we can't unleash ourselves.

Now this one, Belle Pres, this is why this sermon series is going to be a bit challenging for us. Okay, this one's going to be tough for us. We're going to have to learn a new skill here, because many of us have education and skills and experience that have helped us move forward in life. We've learned we can use those things and work hard and get most of what we want. It's worked out very well for us, relying on ourselves, not God. But no matter how accomplished we are, we cannot unleash ourselves. We can participate by cooperating with Jesus, not our leashes, but ultimately, this is a supernatural thing that Jesus has to do.

In this text, Pharaoh is not named, but the Hebrew midwives are given names. They're completely powerless, and yet they get the names, and the king doesn't get named. And God uses them to set in motion the liberation of his people. And this is a pattern we see throughout all of scripture. God does not use the powerful people. God uses the humble who know they need him to get his work done.

And this story of Exodus, this is the foundational story for Jews and by extension, Christians. But it's a very different kind of foundational story than in other cultures like Greece or Rome. Those foundational stories are all about heroes and conquest and strength—you know, Achilles, Romulus, Hercules. But this is a story about being slaves and having to be delivered. It's a story of vulnerability and relying on God, not of mighty warriors, which tells me it really happened. Because if you were making up a foundational story back in these days, this would not be it. Because it's about weakness.

I had a friend whose high school team mascot was a bunny rabbit. Like seriously, I would have loved to have been in that brainstorming session. Oh, I know, let's choose a bunny. So during games, the opposing team would be chanting things like "Go lions, go bears," and his team was like, "Go bunny rabbits." That's the story. That's the story of Exodus. It's not a story of strength, but of weakness. And what it shows is that Jesus does not unleash strong people who try harder. Jesus unleashes people who are humble enough to know they need Jesus to be unleashed in the first place.

So as accomplished as we are, Bellevue Pres, we have to get humble enough to say, Jesus, I can't do this without you. I need your power. Jesus, I'm waiting on you. I'm depending on you. You're my plan A and I don't have a plan B.

So how do we do that? How do we wait on him? How do we do that? Because I know that seems kind of vague. Well, there's a couple of things and we're going to talk about them over the course of this sermon series. But for today, just for today, to get set free, one of the places we get set free is in worship.

And I said this last week, as I've been praying through this series, I keep hearing Jesus say, I will set people free in worship—where the music opens us up emotionally, where the word read and preached guides us, where the community around us encourages us. And the importance of worship in getting free shows up later in the Book of Exodus.

You know, if you set out to read the Bible cover to cover, you will sail through Genesis and most of Exodus. It's got heroic adventures and armies fighting, sex and violence, family dysfunction, all the fun stuff, right? It's kind of a page-turner until you get to Exodus chapter 25, where you run into 13 chapters that are devoted to how to construct the tabernacle where worship would occur. Thirteen chapters in mind-numbing detail right down to the thread count of the curtains. Thirteen chapters of it. Moses is traditionally thought of as having written Exodus—man, even he must have nodded off over those passages, right? Like they're just like, oh, okay, sorry, sorry, sorry, God, right? But it's actually the main point of Exodus.

It's not throwaway boring stuff. This is not about the Red Sea. This is the main point of the Book of Exodus. See, this book that is all about being set free begins in slavery and leashes and it ends in worship in a tabernacle. Because whether it's the golden leashes that are so hard for us to let go of or worry about our own lives or the state of our nation or world—when we are captivated by the beauty, the glory, the power, the love, the grandeur of God, when we are captivated with how big God is, which is what worship is supposed to be doing for us—when we are focused on how big God is, all of our problems seem a whole lot smaller. And we are unleashed from fear and worry and unleashed for freedom and joy.

Look at the midwives: they are focused on God. They are not focused on Pharaoh. They are focused on God. They are worshipping God and as a result, they are completely free from fear, where the king, the most powerful person in the empire, is terrified even of his own slaves because of where his focus is.

So, action steps for this week. First one, same as last week, but we're gonna build on it: make worship a priority this fall, which you've done by being here. Only the Holy Spirit can unleash us and this is one of the places where we experience the Holy Spirit. So, make it a priority.

But more than that, second, we're gonna build on it. More than that, connect with the Holy Spirit during worship. Don't treat worship as a concert followed by a TED Talk, all of which is to be evaluated and critiqued. Am I speaking to anyone in this room? The Holy Spirit is in this room. The Holy Spirit is in this room, right now. And he has something he wants you to hear, something he wants you to know, something he wants you to feel, and something he may want you to do.

So talk to him during worship. Listen for those thoughts that maybe didn't come from you, but they're from him. Pay attention to the words you're singing. Allow yourself to be moved emotionally, because some of us, you know, we grew up being told like that, kind of control your emotions, right? So we got a tight leash on our emotions, right? We're a little bit emotionally constrained, constricted. So whether it's raising your hands or quietly in your heart, allow yourself to be moved emotionally. Don't leash your emotions. God gave us a head and a heart, and he expects us to use both.

And then third, this week, pray this: *Holy Spirit, show me where I'm leashed, and how can I refuse to cooperate?* Ask him to show you that.

I have a friend, a Stanford graduate, who a number of years ago was in his mid-20s, and he was working on Wall Street, making a ton of money. But it was a highly stressful job, so he was always stressed out. He worked constantly, which meant he didn't have time for friends or community or anything like that, and he started to ask the question, *Is this the rest of my life?* But he had a really nice apartment in Manhattan, a lot of financial security, and a job that impressed a whole bunch of people. So those are some diamond-studded golden leashes. And leaving all that to him was almost unimaginable.

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And his faith had always been pretty intellectual, but he wanted to start to change that, so he started to carve out just a little bit of time every morning to just listen to God for anything God might want to say to him in those thoughts that weren't maybe his thoughts. And then he made worship a priority on Sunday. And instead of just kind of waiting for the music to be over so the sermon could start—you know, the intellectual stuff—he'd pay attention to the words of the song. He refused to cooperate with all the leashes put on him growing up that said weakness, to show emotion, that was weakness, especially if you're a guy, do not control your emotions, be in control of emotions, all of that. He refused to cooperate with those leashes and began to feel the presence of Jesus close to him.

After almost a year of his heart gradually opening up to the Holy Spirit, one day he was driving and for some reason, he began to think about HIV-AIDS patients. He hadn't really thought about them before, but he had an acquaintance from church who had HIV-AIDS, and as soon as he started thinking about this guy that he knew, and really when he started thinking about people around the world with HIV-AIDS, where there's not the same access to medicine, his heart just broke. And he suddenly felt this intense tingling in his hands, and this intense tingling in his feet, like it was physical, and he felt incredibly loved by God, and he knew it was the Holy Spirit. And he started to cry, cried so hard, he had to pull over.

And for weeks after that, his heart would just break every time he would think of HIV-AIDS patients around the world, and their suffering. And he felt this enormous love for them, and this enormous love for God, and he was sure that God was leading him to do something about it in Jesus' name, but he didn't know what, because he was a financial analyst, not a doctor. But that sense just kept persisting, so he cast off the leash we call our comfort zone, we call security, and he quit his job.

And then nothing happened. He was unemployed, there were no opportunities coming his way, but he noticed something interesting. For the most part, he wasn't worried. The terror he would have experienced a year earlier about being jobless, it just wasn't there. That leash was off. Because when Jesus is the most important thing to you, then you know that the most important thing in your life can never be lost, and that really reduces fear.

So he decided to go to Chile to do some humanitarian work, in part because he figured his savings would last longer there. And while he was there, he did some research work for World Vision, which is a Christian relief organization. And they liked what he did a lot, so they offered him a job to lead a new initiative to care for—you can guess it—HIV-AIDS patients in the developing world. And he had just enough money to move to where his new job would start. And he loved it. He just loved doing it.

So in his mid-twenties, when he had all the keys to financial success he had spent his life acquiring, he walked away. God broke his heart for what breaks God's heart, provided everything he needed when he needed it, and led him to use his research and leadership skill to help tangibly love people that God loves. It was a massive pay cut from working on Wall Street, but he loved it and he didn't care. God had never been more real in his life, and his life felt big and exciting.

And one of the keys was worship, where Sunday by Sunday, he allowed himself to experience the Holy Spirit and was gradually unleashed from the pressure to succeed and achieve. That leash was off, unleashed from fears about financial security, didn't cooperate with those leashes anymore, stepped out of his comfort zone and found something that gave him meaning and courage and hope and purpose.

I'm not saying you have to quit your job. In fact, after several years at World Vision, he went back to a job in the financial sector, but he went back a different man. Much less leashed to the fears and other things that were driving him before. He was free of all those things.

So what are the golden leashes that are holding you back from the abundant life that Jesus wants to give you? And I know some of you are like, I've never had an experience like that man had. I get that, I get that. We're going to try really hard this quarter to fix that. We're going to try really hard to change that. Because Jesus wants to set you and me free, and I believe he's going to do it.

You know, at the beginning of Exodus, it says the Israelites groaned in their slavery—*groaned*. It's a really strong word. But if you go to the very end of Exodus, the last verses describe the glory of God descending into the tabernacle, the place of worship. The narrative arc of this book that is all about getting free and being unleashed begins with groaning, but it ends with the glory of God descending into a place of worship.

Because when we are captivated by the God who comes to us in Jesus, nothing can hold us captive for very long. As the old hymn says, *turn your eyes upon Jesus, look full in his wonderful face, and the things of earth will grow strangely dim in the light of his glory and grace*.

So Jesus, you are the chain breaker. You are the only one that can set us free from whatever it is, whether it's the burdens we carry into this place, the fears, the anxieties, the worries, whatever those things are, as well as the good things, but things that are maybe holding us back from that bigger life you want to give us. Jesus, we know we cannot do this on our own. We know that only you can set us free. So Jesus, our eyes are on you, and we're waiting on you. And we're saying, come Lord Jesus, come. Break every chain. Set us free, because you're the only one who can. We pray this in your name, Jesus. Amen.

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### **Discussion Questions:**

*Read this week's scripture(s) & answer the below questions with your friends, family, or All In small group.*

**Opening Question:** Looking back to last week's sermon and scripture... How did you live differently or practice what we talked about in your life this week? What did you do and how did it go?

**Scripture Reflection Questions:** Read this week's scripture together and discuss the following:

- What do we learn about God (e.g., traits, personality, what matters, priorities) in this passage?
- What do we learn about people, and ourselves in particular, this week?

**Sermon Reflection Questions:** Reflecting on this week's sermon, discuss the following:

- What do the midwives actions show us about how to get free from the things that hold us in bondage?
- The Israelites came to Egypt at the end of Genesis to escape a famine in their homeland but then ended up enslaved. What things do you turn to for security, meaning, purpose, etc. that end up leashing you? How can you cooperate with the Holy Spirit in being unleashed?

**Closing Question and Application:** Given what we've discussed together today, how might God want you to apply these learnings to your life or in the life of your community this next week? Who might you share this with?

**Closing group prayer:** Spend a few minutes together in your group sharing prayer requests and then praying together for each other. Thank God for the time together, the conversation shared, the other people in the group, and for encouragement in the week ahead.