

Slavery to Comfort

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[0 : 00] Good morning. That was quite good. Good morning. If you don't know me, my name's Chris. I help oversee community groups here at Watermark.

At Watermark, if you haven't been here for a while, we often say we're going on a journey together. Because life is a journey, it's a quest, it's an adventure, it's a voyage.

And those kind of words are meant to make you feel excited. Like me, when I was six years old, my mum used to read to me *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*.

And I was so excited to hear the story. Because deep inside all of us, journeys and stories like that kind of impact us because we want to be going somewhere.

We want to feel like there's some purpose for where we're heading. And the purpose of this journey of life is not just to kind of wander around aimlessly trying to find some random meaning somewhere.

[1 : 07] The purpose is that there is a destination in mind for all of us. And the Bible is filled with images of journeys. And the Exodus story that we've been going through over the last few weeks is one of those stories.

It's a story of redemption where God releases the Israelites out of slavery into freedom in loving and serving the king, the God of Israel, the one who wanted to bring them freedom.

And God had made this promise hundreds of years ago to a man called Abraham that he was going to make this people who were going to go into a land and they were going to be blessed and they were going to be a blessing to all the nations.

And this is the purpose that God was beginning to unfold. But the problem was this journey to the promised land led through the wilderness. And the wilderness is, well, a wilderness.

It's a place of struggle. It's a place of discomfort. It's a place of thirst. It's a place of craving. But it's in the wilderness that God wanted to teach his people what it really meant to trust him.

[2 : 21] And he wanted to show them how gracious and glorious his power was to provide every single step of the way. Because he wanted to show them that once they got in the promised land, which was filled with all these blessings, that actually the greatest blessing wasn't the gifts and the blessings of the land, the physical blessings, but he was going to be the greatest blessing for them.

That's what he was about. And the New Testament, in Hebrews 3, other passages, gives us this same idea of a journey. It uses this Exodus story to describe what it means for us to be Christian.

God releases us from captivity to sin, and then he passes us through not the Red Sea, but the waters of baptism. He then leads us onto a journey into a new resurrection, new creation, a

restored world which satisfies every desire for peace, for security, for longing, for harmony and joy. And through that, he brings a perfect mediator, not like Moses, an imperfect one, but Jesus Christ, to take us there. But we're not yet in the promised land.

Now is actually the journey through the wilderness. That's the way the Bible described it. We haven't yet arrived into full, perfect comfort and redemption.

[3 : 46] So my aim this morning is to talk about how we live well in the wilderness, and to find that our greatest treasure is not found in making our lives more air-conditioned, but in finding joy in this wilderness.

And that's what we're all about in this series. This series is really about how Christ, if you're a Christian, he has set you free, but he set you free from slavery to things.

And whether it's control, whether it's your own sense of self-reliance, whether it's fear of others, or today we're looking at comfort, these things we look to to satisfy us, but God says they're not the ones, the things that are ultimately going to satisfy you.

And we'll find ourselves, if we chase after these things, drinking from a sewage pipe, rather than drinking from the living water that God wants to give us. So we're going to have a look at this story together, and we're going to look at grumbling in the wilderness, comfort in the wilderness, and God's vision for the wilderness.

So grumbling in the wilderness, our comfort in the wilderness, God's vision for the wilderness. So let's kind of dive into the story a little bit. Okay, if you've got your bulletin here, kind of you can check through with me.

[5 : 06] Chapter 15, 22 to 27. It's been three days since the euphoria of passing through the Red Sea. The honeymoon period is over. The water's running out, it's hot, it's dry, it's worse than Hong Kong in the summer, and Moses sees a spring.

And he goes up to it to get water, and it's filthy, undrinkable. And everyone is grumpy and thirsty. This isn't what I bargained for.

Where's the 7-Eleven? And God's people are worse than a bunch of whining kids stuck in a traffic jam in a non-air-conditioned bus in the summer.

They're whining, they're complaining to Moses, and Moses says, God, okay, help me. And God provides an amazing water purification system, and they can drink.

And then, God, remember, who is guiding them with a pillar of cloud and fire, he leads them to Elim. And Elim is like an oasis in the desert. It's got shade, it's got coconut milk, it's beautiful, it's paradise.

[6 : 13] Finally, it feels like this is more like it. They settle down there for a few days in their little resort of Elim. And then, chapter 16, 1-4, they've got to move on.

The holiday's over. They've got to move out further into the wilderness. God is leading them on. And he's leading them somewhere. But nearly one month later, the food supplies start running low. They're on to one-figure day.

They're getting seriously hungry. And the Israelites are like me. When I'm hungry, I'm miserable. And the whining starts as a little murmur, and then it grows, and then it grows, and then it grows, until finally the frustration explodes.

Verse 3, If only we had died by the Lord's hand in Egypt. There we sat around pots of meat and ate all the food we wanted, but you have brought us out into this desert to starve this entire assembly to death.

They're a grateful lot. Now, I don't know if you remember earlier in the story, but in Egypt, I don't remember the Israelites sitting around like barbecues, kind of rejoicing in the food.

[7 : 23] Do you remember that? No, they were crying out for God to save them, for God to rescue them, right? And they'd forgotten that kind of part, you know, rose-tinted spectacles, looking back on the past.

But, you know, when we experience discomfort, our temptation is always to compare to another time, to other people. The grass always looks greener than where we are right at the moment. And they've lost sight of where God is taking them, and they've lost sight of what God has done for them, and they've lost sight of the promised land. And they think, because it's hard now, Moses must be against them, God must be against them, they'd rather die than follow what God has got for them.

Because, you see, the Israelites were more focused on their stomachs and discomfort than seeing the goodness of God, and they'd lost sight of him.

They'd lost sight of the miracles. They'd lost sight of the way he provided every step of the way. And they kept losing sight of that. Now, it's not that their need for food was illegitimate, totally.

[8 : 32] Food is necessary to live, but God had showed them, I will provide every step of the way. I just want to use this as an opportunity for you to see just how amazing my grace and my love is, because I will always provide for my people.

But they were more interested in getting a comfortable ride than really in knowing God in this process. Now, I don't know about you, but if you've got a bunch of whining kids in the back of your car, and you've already given them a snack recently, and it's not far now, and you're saying, hold on, there's a great meal coming, and they're still whining, I don't know what your response is. My response is usually frustration. But God is incredibly patient with the Israelites. He graciously provides for them.

He says, verse four, I'll rain down bread from heaven for you, but I'm not going to give it so you can kind of bulk by, so you can kind of put some away in the freezer for later. Every day, you're going to have to depend on me for grace.

Every day, it's a test to see every day, will you trust me? And on the Sabbath, you're going to have to collect enough for two days, and I'm going to provide it, because I want you to rest, put me first, know that you can trust me.

[9 : 47] To satisfy all your needs with good things, because I'm good, and I care for you. Verse six says, In the evening, you'll know that it was the Lord who brought you out of Egypt, and in the morning, you'll see the glory of the Lord, because he's heard your grumbling against him.

Every circumstance that God brings you and I into, no matter whether it's coming to the springs of Elim, and it's beautiful, and it's comfortable, or whether it's wandering in the wilderness, is an opportunity, is a gift, a circumstance where God says, here is a chance for you to rely on me, for you to put me first, for you to trust me.

Here's a chance for you to experience my grace sustaining you. Verse 10, God shows up in the wilderness. He says, I am with you. His presence is there with them.

That's what he wants to say to some of us now who feel like we're going through a wilderness in our lives. I am there. I am with you. You can trust me to provide. Will you?

And the thing is, God in this story is not just interested in giving the Israelites a hard life. He actually provides great tasting manna.

[11 : 09] He could have provided anything. He provides honey flavored crackers. Okay? And it's a foretaste of the milk and honey that he's going to bring them into the promised land for. And you know, they're full.

Verse 18, they lack nothing. And all the grateful Israelites can say is, when they see this manna, what is it? Which is what manna means.

Manna means, what is it? You can see how grateful they are. God wants them to know his grace. All they can see is their circumstances and their discomfort. And even after all of that, God providing again and again, the Israelites still doubt that God's going to be good enough to provide for them.

So they go out collecting more than God tells them to collect. Just in case. Because you never know if God's really good. He came through last time, but maybe he's not going to come through again.

[12 : 10] So we've got to provide. We've got to build a little bit of security. We've got to make sure, because maybe God really isn't good enough for us. Let me ask you right now, what's going on in your life?

Is it an Elim experience? Does it feel like a wilderness experience? Do you see what's happening in your life as a gift from God, as an opportunity to know him and to see his grace?

Or are you like the Israelites, who are more consumed with your comfort, that you've lost sight of a gracious, good God, who has provided many, many things for us?

That's the grumbling in the wilderness. Next, our comfort in the wilderness. In this passage, Moses actually says, your grumbling and complaining is not against me.

It's not just kind of being real. It's against God. He's saying, you're actually saying to God in this circumstances, you're not good. We can't trust you.

[13 : 17] Because complaining in a way that refuses to run to God in circumstances and find your hope in him is always, always a desire for something more than God.

For them, it was a desire for comfort more than God. And anything you desire more than God, the Bible calls an idol. It's a sign when you start complaining and grumbling that actually you think God is not good, something else you deserve, you should get more than God.

It's an idol. I teach on a Monday night at Hong Kong Youth Space. I teach English there. A couple of weeks ago, I was just kind of coming back.

I'd done some cleaning in the flat before I went. I finished my class about 9.45. I'm on the bus back. It's 10.15. I'm tired. I'm hungry. I just want to get home and rest.

And then Fiona, my wife, calls me. And she's just got back from a long day. And she's just come into the kitchen and just seen the state of the kitchen. And it's not a pleasant sight.

[14 : 28] I'd forgotten that I'd been a little bit too engrossed in my other things to actually clear up the mess that was in the kitchen. And my wife graciously reminds me that actually, I mean, she

needs to take 15 minutes to try and clear everything up so the devastation doesn't kind of remain.

And she's tired. And she tells me, hey, can you be just a little bit, she's very gracious. Listen, I know you've helped, but could you just be a little bit more responsible, clear up after you've done, because that would just make my life so much easier in this thing.

She's been gracious. But as she's speaking, I'm getting frustrated and impatient. So I quickly try and shut down the conversation. Okay, okay, fine, fine, fine. I'll do it next time. I'll better do it.

I'll do it next time. My wife knows that I'm not really listening. No understanding from me as to what she's just had to do. She's tired. And I'm thinking, I don't need this.

Don't you know what a long day I've had? Don't you realize that I have done 90% of the cleaning in the flat today? Poor Chris.

[15:37] Isn't life hard? I just need a break. That's all I want now. Just give me some peace. I don't have to deal with this now.

Poor me. It's not fair. Isn't life terrible? Now, what's going on in my heart?

I held my tongue. I didn't say that to her. But actually, because she didn't experience my apology, she didn't experience my sympathy in that, I didn't express my frustration.

I held my tongue. But actually, if you could have seen what was going on in my heart, you would have seen that whether I'd said it or not, exactly the same thing was going on here, and God looks at the heart.

Because you see, why am I so impatient and frustrated when something that's clearly my fault and it's been dealt with graciously, well, is it because I'm tired? Well, tiredness contributes to those things, but tiredness doesn't cause me to be impatient.

[16:47] You know, I don't suddenly get tired and then I'm really impatient. It doesn't happen like that. Tiredness lets down my guard, but actually what my heart wants, it wants comfort.

It wants me to have my little world just suiting me at that time. And my wife was stopping me getting comfort at that moment.

I didn't want to hear it. And I deserve comfort because I work hard. And my wife is not feeling loved by the way that I respond.

I'm not actually thinking about her because it's actually all about me. And the root of all our idols is a self-centeredness which wants life to be all about me, what suits me, what's comfortable for me.

And it stops me seeing other people and loving them. And I think if I'm honest, as I look around Hong Kong, I think this idol of comfort is one of the ones that we actually struggle with enormously.

[17:49] Even in our church, we struggle with this. Because we're told that satisfaction in life is found just if you can make your life as comfortable and convenient as possible. And discomfort must be avoided.

at all possible costs. You see, we live in a city that just revolves around convenience and comfort. Technology and science has developed our lives, transformed it to the point where we are the most comfortable people in the whole of history.

There were emperors before were never as comfortable as we are. You know, the Israelites struggle to find food. We have shops open late selling fast food because we can't wait for slow food. and then you even get Food Panda to deliver it to your home so you don't have to walk out of the door. It's amazing. We have helpers, great public transport, fast internet, Siri.

You know, you don't even have to press a button on your phone now. You can just talk into it and it does what you want. And I could go on and on and on and on and on. There's so many things we have.

[18:51] Washing machines. You know, incredible. But washing machines are great. But in spite of all the inconvenience we have in Hong Kong, I still find myself complaining.

I complain about the lack of space. I complain about the air quality. I complain about those annoying people who stand on the lift texting right in my way so it takes me at least five seconds longer to get either to the lift or get down the escalator.

We complain about schooling. Okay. And I then say, it's not like this in the UK. You know, we have great air. And I go back to the UK. And you know, the air's great.

And you know, there's space. And then I ring up the customer service. And I'm sent halfway around the world. And they're not contactable after 7 p.m. And the shop's shut at 5.30 or 6.

And the nearest one is about 15-minute drive. And the public transport is so expensive and always delayed. And very quickly I realize I'm complaining. Because, and everyone else is complaining as

well.

[20 : 00] Doesn't matter where you go. Everyone complains. Now, why, if we have this unprecedented level of comfort that others in the past would only have dreamed of, do I still complain and grumble?

Why? Because I believe the great lie that just having more comfort, a bigger flat, retirement, a vacation, anything else, something more will satisfy me.

And you know, we're willing to suffer long hours of work just so we can make our life and our family's life more comfortable in the future. But it doesn't matter where you live.

It doesn't matter how much time-saving gadgets you have. You will never truly be satisfied with them because there will always be inconvenience and uncomfortable people and uncomfortable situations that will frustrate you.

Always. You will never be satisfied. Because now is a wilderness time. There are times of refreshment. It's not the promised land. There are ELIM experiences.

[21 : 11] There are good things. But you know, what happens is a greater comfort leads to greater expectations. And yesterday's desires become today's needs and demands.

When internet first came out and I first went on the internet, it was amazing. I was like, wow, just, it was great. It was such a privilege. And it would take like 10 years to download one page.

But I could wait. Now, if it takes longer than one second, I'm like shouting at the computer. I'm like cursing the thing. Why?

Because I now expect and I think that this is what I deserve. And a desire has become a need, become a demand.

And the thing is, our expectations are shaped by everybody around us. We compare to everyone around. And we always think like the Israelites that the grass is greener on the other side.

[22 : 14] So if we just get something more, then it's always going to be better. And we're in a competition in Hong Kong and you can't get left behind by anybody else. And we focus more on what we don't have than what we do. And we become ungrateful.

And we'll shy away from ever making decisions which will make us uncomfortable for the sake of the gospel because we think that life is going to collapse if I'm uncomfortable.

And so it's going to be moaning and complaining if my life is not the way I want it. Because for me, and I struggle with this one, fundamentally life is more about me than about God.

I think I deserve to have comfort and I'm not willing to be inconvenienced because I can't imagine that I can live without it. Spurgeon, who's a great English preacher, said, when we have much of God's providential mercies, his amazing mercy, it often happens that we have but little of God's grace and little gratitude for the bounties, the enormous abundance that we have received.

We are full and we forget God, satisfied with earth and we're content to do without heaven. Rest assured, it's harder to know how to be full than it is to know how to be hungry.

[23 : 35] Take care that you ask in your prayers that God would teach you how to be full. Isn't that interesting? We are often full yet not satisfied and yet God says, I want to teach you how to be full and it's my provision.

So where do you see your heart regularly complaining? Are the blessings that you have held with open hands knowing that they're a gift from God graciously given?

Are our lives personally as a church marked by a radical thankfulness and contentment whether we're in Elim or whether we're in the wilderness or are we never happy with what we've got always wanting that we've got to have more?

We grumble in the wilderness because we seek comfort more than we want to find satisfaction in God. Thirdly, God's vision for us in the wilderness.

God's vision for us in the wilderness. The problem with the Israelites is that they've shrunk their little worlds down to their stomachs.

[24 : 50] But God wanted to expand their vision. God had called Israel out of Egypt into a relationship with himself to experience his grace and blessings so that they would be a blessing to the nations.

You look at the end of this passage verse 32 to 34 with this test that God brings them through and God is faithful they're unfaithful but he still provides and he tells this unfaithful people put a piece of manna in a jar to save it as a testimony to generations to come of how good and faithful God is because they're going to forget like you forget.

And God's vision for this test that he takes them through is not just about them. He's wanting to make it so that their eyes get focused on him and so that they can see that regardless of how comfortable or uncomfortable how convenient or inconvenient God is leading them to a place where his name his glory his goodness will be made known to themselves and to millions of people like us who are reading the story even today.

That's what God's wanting to do through this little incident. But what we do what I do is we focus down on our narrow things that we think we need and we narrow the world down to an armchair of one when God wants to expand it to a whole world that is out there.

I think the story says these two things for us. One is God's vision for your journey and our journey as a church is to grow our delight in him.

[26 : 36] Grow our delight in him. Jesus in John chapter 6 he says to a crowd of people he's fed the 5,000 hungry people and you know what happens after them they start to follow him because they just want to get fed.

They want to get food because they think Jesus he's a great bakery. That's what they're thinking and so Jesus says to them your fathers ate manna in the wilderness and they died but I am the bread of life.

Whoever comes to me will never grow hungry whoever believes in me will never be thirsty. When we celebrate a communion we celebrate with the bread of God's provision for our needs by dying on a cross showing that he's good that he loves us that he'll provide for us but you know how those people responded they started grumbling and they walked away many of them from Jesus because Jesus for them was only a means of food and if you want Jesus just to get his blessings then when he's provided one meal for you you'll soon become hungry again and if he doesn't seem to provide it as quickly as you want then you'll go away and look for another canteen to find food from but Jesus is saying I'm not just about giving you meals blessings physical things I don't want to just give you that I want to give you myself the chef and if you get the chef do you know what you get unlimited blessings which will last eternally satisfyingly and I know what you need and I will provide what you need it's not about you and getting the blessings and getting the comfort it's about him because when you get him you get everything that's what God is doing so do you come to church is your relationship with God just about getting fed or is it actually about

I want to really know Jesus as a church Jesus says to you and to me whatever is going on in your life right now are you willing to lay down your chase for temporary comfort which will soon leave you hungry are you willing to lay it down for the sake of the gospel for the sake of having a satisfaction in me are you going to hold it with open hands because I want to satisfy you in a way that you will not be satisfied if you chase comfort if you're a Christian if you're not a Christian following Jesus is not going to make your life easier listen it's going to make your life harder guaranteed if you really want to follow Jesus it will make it harder but it will make it the most satisfying life that you can ever possibly lead because he says I am the bread of life the bread of life if you want to live come to me and the call today is are you willing to follow him however uncomfortable or inconvenient he is because he wants to show you how good he is so we need to repent of where we actually think other things are better than him it's about delighting in him but it's not just about that it's about because vision for the wilderness is about others as well do you know that contentment is one of God's great evangelistic strategies did you know that

Philippians 2 verse 14 to 15 it says this Paul who writes it he says do everything without grumbling or arguing so that you do everything everything without grumbling or arguing so that you may be pure and blameless children of God without fault in a warped and crooked generation then you if you're not grumbling you will shine among them you will shine among them like stars in the sky as you hold firmly the word of life he's saying in a society of comfort seekers grumblers like me complainers like me God's evangelistic strategy for Hong Kong is to raise up a church which will find contentment in him so that when you go out into your families your workplaces your friendship circles and they see what's going on in your life where things are not comfortable but actually you're still able to find joy and satisfaction in him and you're still able to be content and people will look at you and say what is up with you how can you still find contentment when you're not getting everything you want and you know some people will be attracted to that light and will be able to point them to

[31 : 32] Christ to say it's not me it's him turn to him because he's the one who can do it for you as well in a thirsty hungry society around us that's what Hong Kong needs it's not about you it's about

Christ it's not about you it's about others I worked for a while in a garden centre in the UK and one day I was in one of these polytunnels they're kind of like green like plastic greenhouses and I was watering some tomato plants in there I had a hose put the hose on one of the tomato plants it snapped in two and I'm like oh no so I went to the head gardener and I said I'm really sorry I'm just destroyed one of your tomato plants and he turned around to me and he said don't worry it's fine because you know those tomato plants there they were not supposed to be kept inside in the warm and the comfort of that greenhouse because you know those tomato plants are actually meant to be kept outside in the rain and the storms and the elements of life because you know when they face those things what happens is it strengthens their branches it strengthens them so that they're able to hold more fruit and you say he said that tomato heart snapped because it actually never felt the pressure of the water and it's never going to be the tomato plant that it should have been you and I and this church is meant to be a tomato plant that is meant to bear fruit fruit isn't for you you don't eat your own fruit if you're a tomato plant fruit is for others that's what we're made for a tomato plant is made to bear fruit

Christians are made to bear fruit the church is made to be a tomato bearing plant and we will never enjoy who you and we were meant to be as a church if we simply stay inside the greenhouse of comfort and we don't step out to those who don't know Christ to those who are not comfortable reaching out to yes in the outside God does bring sunshine he does bring times of refreshment and joy and pleasure and comfort like Elim he wants to do that to show you his goodness but he will lead you on into the wilderness and in the wilderness of our lives out there is where that we'll have stories to tell to generations to come to people around you of how good and amazing our God is and that's our experience as a church you know we don't always have this venue we like people in the wilderness sometimes but God has provided a venue he's provided finances again and again and again for us as a church it's not about us it's about him it's about people around us in this city who don't know him so let me challenge us as a church as a church we believe in community because we believe that the gospel brings people together it's one of our values there is a danger with community the danger with community is we can be so comfortable with our particular community that we never do this thing which is called mission we're never reaching out because we don't want to go out of our comfort zone to the people that we're not so comfortable with because we want to stay in the greenhouse students singles who do you talk to after the service do you only ever talk to people who are like you or are you willing to go out of your comfort to see who God might be bringing around you and to take a step of faith to actually go up to somebody and say hi some of us that's the step we need to take marriage do you only ever talk to married people or are you willing to engage with people who are not like you who are singles who are non-believers who are people who are wrestling with things that you have no idea how to deal with but you're willing to go out of your way because if we don't do that we're going to miss out on the stories that God wants to show us his grace and his glory and you know if you're an introvert and a thousand objections come to your mind or even if you're an extrovert and you've got a thousand things in your mind which say I can't reach out to somebody who's not like me because I don't know what to say I don't know where to go and God says listen I'm the same God as the God of the wilderness I provide grace for every situation so will you ask me for grace and then step out and you'll see me provide whether it's words whether it's the the ability to connect with someone whatever it is God will provide in your cgs when was the last time we started thinking not just about how to be comfortable but about the people who don't know this great and awesome God are we prepared to have people in our groups to connect with people that we don't necessarily like we don't necessarily feel most comfortable with but we know that the gospel calls me to love them anyway and we're going to need grace because actually that's all that can get you through that but we have someone who is so satisfying that we say if we want to put him first then we will see him provide and we will see us grow and we will flourish like that tomato plant because you know for a tomato plant the greatest joy that it can have is to see someone pick its fruit and enjoy it to see the joy that the fruit that God works in us and through us by his grace as we find satisfaction in him whatever circumstance he brings us and we need each other with that because we keep forgetting but you know if we step out with his grace we will have stories to tell for generations to come of the faithfulness of God's good provision

God is good I don't have to look elsewhere for comfort and that's when this journey this adventure in life gets really exciting and God gets the glory let's pray maybe just stop and think for a minute

when was the last time for the sake of the gospel I went out of my comfort zone when was the last time that I had to rely on God's grace to get me through just as you think about your own heart and I think about my own heart God wants to show you that he is enough for you and for me he wants to show us that in whatever we're going through right now he is enough father I pray that you'd forgive me where actually

[39 : 51] I live for comfort often more than you I procrastinate and things that I know I should do because I don't want to do the hard uncomfortable thing I stay comfortable with the things that are familiar to me because it seems too risky to go out of my way and yet you're a God who is right there with us calling us to step out I pray just show us for each one of us it's going to mean something different please just show us what it means to step out this week whether it means we need to actually just see with gratitude what you've given us and lay down some of those desires that we have Lord whether it's we just need to open our eyes to see the people around us to see that you have called us to love to point them to see something that's more satisfying than just getting a new iPhone or just getting a better career position

Lord please would you help us to see and experience just how good you are would this church be a light in this city so that people would turn to you pray this in your name amen