SHACKLE FREE

The show was a little long for my toddler boys. They enjoyed the circus, but as the acrobats, clowns, and other acts neared their second hour, my kids started to fidget. They'd come to see one thing: elephants.

Our family left early and piled into the car to head home. That's when we noticed an elephant eating behind a circus tent. We pulled up near the enormous beast, rolled down the windows, and gawked. This sight was just what the boys wanted!

Little was said as we watched with wide-eyed curiosity as the elephant dined. One question, however, begged to be asked. In a three-year-old's broken English my youngest voiced what we were all thinking: “How come that big ole elephant doesn’t tear down this fence and escape to freedom?”

I pondered that question as I noticed the elephant glance up every now and then to peer through the fence's holes. Just beyond that wire enclosure was a whole world of activity and thrills. To me the elephant seemed to long for freedom. If only he knew that his little fence was nothing compared to his innate strength.

Day 1
Chained to a Problem

My son asked a question about the elephant that might be asked of the sheep of God's pasture (Ps. 100:3). Why don't the people of God, who can tap into so much divine power, break through the barriers that keep us from experiencing an abundant relationship with Him? Why do we hesitate to push through to freedom and abundant life?

Review the “Promised-Land Living” list on page 160. Would you say that you are currently walking in an abundant relationship to God? Why or why not?

Why do you think many believers never experience the fullness of God?
In the margin describe how the previous question applies to your experiences, past or present.

Jesus said He came to bring life in the fullest (John 10:10). Sadly, God's people often choose entrapment over the abundant life Jesus offers. Identifying what keeps us from entering into a powerful and life-altering relationship with God will help us determine how to overcome our bonds.

I pondered this question while looking at that elephant. As I watched, the animal shifted its weight and a clanking noise followed. Then I realized that hidden behind a tuft of grass, a shackle held his left ankle. I shook my head at the bolts and iron that really amounted to nothing more than an ankle bracelet on the massive beast. If only the elephant realized he could break that shackle with one powerful move and be free. To my boys, it seemed the fence kept the elephant at bay, but I knew better. That small shackle tied around his ankle was the true culprit. The elephant couldn't breach the weak fence line until he gained freedom from the chain.

Familiarize yourself with the portion of Exodus 1 in the margin. Underline the key phrases that describe the conditions the Israelites faced in bondage.

Do any areas of your life cause you to feel like the phrases you've just underlined?

GOD'S PEOPLE IN CHAINS

For about 370 years the Israelites faced Egyptian oppression. Intimidated by their increasing numbers, Pharaoh determined to control the Hebrews by harnessing their bodies and souls. Before God's chosen people could hope to enter the land promised to them, the shackle had to break. It held them back from finding the abundance God planned for them.


Draw a line from each picture to its corresponding New Testament principle.

Pharaoh
Abundant life in Christ
Life of bondage to sin
Jesus, Christ

Pharaoh's oppression of the Jews is often used to illustrate a human's oppression by Satan and bondage to sin. Satan desires to entrap each of us in a sticky web of unrepentant rebellion against God. This shackle is too tightly locked for our own fingers to pry open; only a specifically designed and uniquely appointed instrument can free us.

Before we define that instrument, let's take a closer look at the locks that fasten Satan's chains to us: The curse of sin and the lifestyle of sin. We'll explore the first today and the other tomorrow.

THE CURSE OF SIN

How does Deuteronomy 4:20 describe the conditions of Israel's bondage in Egypt?

What adjectives would you use to describe the life of an individual living in bondage to sin?

Life in slavery was brutal. In ancient times slaves generally went barefoot and their work lasted all day. In Egypt temperatures climbed to over 110 degrees. In such conditions, their kidneys suffered. Their hands were violently abused, likely torn by the unending work. Death by dehydration, heat prostration, and heatstroke were common. To say the Israelites lived in misery is no stretch.

The harsh effects of physical slavery, however, pale in comparison to the enslaved condition of the human soul. While Israel's slavery was physical, ours originates in the depths of our hearts. Indeed, the Hebrews' hands were shredded in pain, but our souls are maimed and maligned as our enemy seeks to destroy us.

The curse of sin enslaves our souls; it is a lock and chain that keeps us from finding freedom. It guarantees every human a life of separation from God.

Sin. The very word makes me cringe. Most of us prefer to use words like indiscretion, slip, or mistake to describe our souls' shortcomings. Fiery preachers of old would hew out messages on the seriousness of sin without shame or compromise. Today the importance of calling "sin" "sin" falls to the wayside as our churches, ministries, and messages address lighter spiritual topics that draw crowds without stirring controversy. While we often skip around the very issue that most needs to be addressed, we remain shackled, peering through the fence wondering why we cannot experience true freedom.
The curse of sin began in Genesis, when Adam and Eve chose to indulge in sin in the garden of Eden. Their choice affects every human. As soon as Eve sank her teeth into the fruit and Adam joined her rebellion, the shackles were in place and our fate was sealed. (See Gen. 3.) In an instant the curse of original sin was woven into the fabric of every life.

Adam and Eve's sin caused them to be cast from Eden, a land of endless bounty and a place where God literally walked with man in the cool of the day. Just as Adam and Eve forfeited the place of utmost fulfillment and abundance, all those who refuse to pursue freedom from the curse of sin forfeit the place of "milk and honey"—fulfillment, freedom, satisfaction, contentment, and overwhelming joy.

The principle of original sin appears in Romans 5:12.

Describe the curse of original sin in your own words.

THE KEY TO FREEDOM

To obtain freedom from the shackles of Egyptian bondage, the Hebrews had to trust in God-empowered Moses as their deliverer. Moses was a uniquely appointed instrument of God, sent to deliver God's people from the rule of Pharaoh. He became a powerful symbol of God's grace. We have no record of anyone attempting to free the Israelites from Egypt until God called Moses to challenge Pharaoh.

Likewise, only One instrument can unshackle us from the curse and consequences of original sin. Just as the Israelites had to accept a fate of slavery should they choose to ignore God's plan to break their chains, we are bound to soul slavery should we ignore God's ultimate deliverer: Jesus Christ.

Read Romans 5:17-19, then complete the following.

The consequence of one transgression is ________ (v. 17).

The consequence of God's gift of grace through Christ is ________ (v. 19).

If, like me, you are ready to experience God, not just know about Him, make certain that you are no longer under the curse of original sin.

If you have accepted reconciliation with God through the death and resurrection of Christ, write the time and circumstances surrounding your commitment. Solidify that decision through prayer.

If you aren't sure that you've ever taken this step, then why stay shackled for another day? Abundant and fullness of life are just beyond the bend! Take time to accept God's gift of Jesus Christ! It's simple. See Romans 10:9. Then consider writing the following prayer in your own words as you give your life to Christ. (Don't forget to share your decision with your group leader or another friend in your study. She'll be thrilled!)

Lord Jesus, I am a sinner in need of a Savior. I no longer want to be bound by the curse of sin. I want to be free. I believe You are the only One who can accomplish this in my life. I accept Your death on Calvary as payment for my sins. Today I place faith in You as the only way, the only truth, and the only life (John 14:6). Please, Jesus, take up residence in me through the Person of the Holy Spirit to empower me to walk fully in the abundance that You desire. In Jesus' name, amen.

Romans 10:9
Day 2
Chained By Choice

The image of the chained elephant haunted me long after we left the circus. A Google™ search helped answer some of my questions. I discovered they train elephants by chaining them in infancy. Since the babies are not strong enough to pull free, they grow tired of trying and resign themselves to a life of limitations. They adapt to living in boundaries of the chain. Soon even a small rope is sufficient to restrain an enormous elephant. The animal considers freedom a hopeless notion and therefore stops trying to experience it.

Yesterday we discovered that by God's grace through Jesus we can be free from the curse of original sin. Once a relationship with God has been established through Christ, the journey to freedom begins. Before we can travel to our personal Canaan with any effectiveness, however, we must also overcome a second lock that fastens the Enemy's chain to us: the sinful lifestyle.

In what ways do you think lifestyle sin differs from original sin?

Overcoming original sin requires that we accept God's gracious gift of His Son, who overcame sin's powerful hold over people. Overcoming a sinful lifestyle, on the other hand, requires daily relying on the Holy Spirit's power. It means that we must continually turn our backs on the temptation to rebel against God.

Underline the section of Galatians 5:1 that reveals Christ's work for us. Circle our responsibility.

A difference exists between being free in Christ and living free in Him. After Pharaoh agreed to free the slaves, the children of Israel had to make a choice to pack their bags, physically leave, and follow Moses to Canaan. I remember times when I complained that my Christian life didn't seem to have any of the "milk and honey" that the Lord offered in Scripture. Thinking back,

What a tragedy it would be for us to be given freedom but not walk in it! For believers, the ability to walk in freedom becomes dependent on an individual’s daily decision to walk in the power received at salvation.

Describe a time when you lived as a slave to sin even though you were a free believer. How did you feel?

We must change the sinful ways we’ve been trained to live and by the Holy Spirit’s power within us, we can. The only way to deprogram an elephant so that he no longer enjoys captivity but experiences and enjoys freedom is to unfasten him and gently guide him into the wild. Since our tendency as humans is to err in a direction away from God, we must retrain ourselves to walk in the ways of freedom.

Prepare to brainstorm in your group practical ways we can reprogram our thinking to fully enjoy God’s freedom.

LIVING FREE

The Enemy wants to keep us from living free. God gives believers in Christ positional sanctification. That means we have a position of "set-apartness," holiness and righteousness that cannot be altered or manipulated. Nothing can be done to remove a true believer from her positional standing of righteousness before the Father. Being positionally sanctified, however, cannot be the end goal of a believer determined to live in Christ’s freedom.

After our standing before the Father is secured, we must turn our attention to the business of lifestyle sanctification, leaving Egypt behind us. Since we still live in the flesh, which has sinful tendencies, and since we have an enemy who is working against us, we must work through a process that requires obedience and yieldedness to God. Being declared free gives us eternal freedom but walking in it gives us daily freedom. Although salvation is definitely by faith and not works, daily living in that freedom takes work as we cooperate with God’s Spirit.

It’s important to note that Pharaoh had difficulty managing the abundant number of Israelites. He acknowledged this by appointing taskmasters over
Look carefully at Exodus 1:11-14, and in the margin list words or phrases that reveal the taskmasters' role.

Verse 12 uses the word afflic. The Hebrew word used here is "anan", the same word used in Genesis 15:13 to describe the oppression God's people would face. This word means "to thwart, to frustrate, to be made low, to be bowed down and made submissive." In other words, the goal of Egyptian slavery was not merely physical. Egyptian rulers intended to dispirit the spirit of the Hebrew people, thereby lessening any threat of rebellion or escape. This kind of abuse undoubtedly helped to dissuade the children of God from desiring to live like the people of God.

We must recognize that the Devil has assigned taskmasters to us too. The Enemy of our souls knows our strengths and weaknesses, and he has the goal of contriving ways to keep us under his thumb. He wants to burden each of us to the point that we no longer feel passionate about being people of God. He does it by convincing us that freedom in Christ is a dream. He encourages us to keep returning to the very sins from which Christ freed us. The writer of Hebrews warns of this: "Let us also lay aside every encumbrance and the sin which so easily entangles us" (12:1). Notice the passage says "the" sin—it's a specific and personal affliction that is unique to you.

With what specific "affliction" is the Devil plaguing you right now?

THE MIND GAME

In part living in freedom depends on our response to the Devil's mind games. A mind game of sorts holds the elephant at the circus captive: Feel the chain around your leg? No freedom for you! The Enemy plays a similar trick on us. He causes us to think that freedom is impossible. By getting us mired in a lifestyle of sin, he makes us feel hopeless. It's not long before we give up on the idea of really experiencing God in our lives. We begin to think that liberty from life's messes is more fiction than fact.

One key method Satan uses to keep us captive is by causing us to gradually step further and further into our rebellion. Eventually we are deeper than we ever thought we'd be.

Sin is progressive. What once satisfied us loses its power. Before we know it, we are more and more entangled in a web that is slowly taking the life out of us. The situation the Hebrews faced illustrates the progression. The Israelites became so ensnared in the freedom concept over their lives, Pharaoh upped

What is it like to have your sin snowball out of control?

Are you caught in a lifestyle of sin you just can't seem to shake? The Enemy's goal is to keep you in his web so you can never journey toward the soul-cleansing freedom the Lord has for you. End today's lesson by offering yourself to the Lord and honestly exposing your rebellion, discouragement, and fatigue to Him. Ask the Lord to help you share your struggle with another believer who can keep you accountable on the journey to living free.

Day 3

Bound to a Memory

In 1863 President Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation. The document consisted of two executive orders leading to freedom for four million slaves who lived on American soil. The news of legal freedom was met with unbridled joy by those inflicted by inhumane treatment under slavery. Not all slaves, though, rejoiced at the announcement.

The problem was that many slaves had come to enjoy their lifestyles compared to the ominous alternatives. "House slaves," for example, worked directly with their master's families. They were often granted far superior treatment to that experienced by field slaves. Relatively speaking, a house slave's life was simple and fairly convenient. It came with certain perks that some weren't certain they wanted to leave behind. To some, experiencing freedom would mean losing a life far from ideal but at least less risky than the unknown. Many house slaves willingly chose slavery over freedom to avoid the risks that freedom entailed. This begs the question: Were they really free?

Far too often the decision made by some post-war slaves reflects the choices of modern Christians. For the remainder of this week, let's turn our consideration to another potential barrier to experiencing promised-land living in Christ: an addiction to the "perks" of sin.

What are some of the perks you've seen the Enemy attach to sin to make it more appealing?