

## The Exodus Journey

There is a fundamental dynamic that takes place in the human experience which touches all of our lives. If we look carefully, we can see it in the testimony of history at various times and places. It involves the basic human journey, which generally begins in oppression, and takes us through the wilderness toward the Promised Land. Oppression, Wilderness, and Promised Land are three realities that most human beings experience.

*Oppression* is a state of existence where the boundaries are fixed and basic needs are provided. This includes food, clothing, shelter, work, and even the meaning of life. If the system of oppression is benevolent and generous, then life might not seem too bad. If it is harsh and cruel, then life will be a living hell. In either case, the result is similar and some of the results are generally the same. Oppression leads to radical dependence and a distorted view of the future. The human being becomes a victim of the situation because of the radical dependence and is often unable to make decisions or take responsibility for life.

The *Wilderness* is another story. There, one might be confronted with a situation where there are no boundaries and no provisions. The victim has now turned into the wanderer and now faces a life of not being cared for. There is no food, no bed, no direction, and no hope. Alice In Wonderland asked when she came to a fork in the road: "Which road should I take?" The guide said: "Where are you going?" She replies: "I don't know." He said: "Then it doesn't make any difference which road you take if you don't know where you are going?" In the Wilderness we are simply lost, wandering people, living with no goal or direction toward the future.

Israel learned that life was much different once she left Egypt. Pharaoh had provided food, shelter, work, and even meaning in life, such as it was. In the wilderness she discovered

none of these and many wanted to return to Egypt. Some asked Moses: “Where is the break, and where are the graves to bury our dead? Pharaoh at least gave us bread and graves.” It is interesting that from the perspective of the wilderness, the old state of oppression doesn’t look so bad. Like the Prodigal Son, we have a deep yearning to return home to a situation that was intolerable to us when we were there.

*The Promised Land* is what makes the difference. If it doesn’t exist in our lives we are in serious trouble because it represents our dreams and hopes for the future. Its promise is what brought Moses to life and moved him to create a whole new vision. It was what kept him filled with hope while lost in the wilderness. It was what led to his fundamental conviction that neither Egypt nor the wilderness were his home of final resting place.

The problem with the Promised Land is that when you are in Egypt it’s hard to believe that it exists. Egypt is a place of death, and dead people are seldom filled with hope.

For the person in prison, the prison represents the Egypt experience. There radical dependency develops. There the need to make decisions diminished, and it is there that the vision of the future becomes distorted until it centers only on a parole date and the street. In fact, the street becomes mistaken for the Promised Land. This is the result of a distorted view of hope, and like Israel in the wilderness, often the person who leaves prison finds the struggle of the street so painful and hopeless, that the meaning and reality of prison life doesn’t seem quite so hard.

For those who embrace the Exodus Program, the Promised Land is the Exodus Contract. It involves concrete goals in seven areas: Family Ties; Education; Physical Fitness; Community Involvement; Spiritual Growth; Vocation; and the Events of the Future. The goals of the Exodus Contract are intended to create an intentional human being who knows that the struggle is painful

and deep, and that it holds death and life. It is the Exodus view that out of this struggle we will create a new world that is both human and life-giving. The past becomes approved (it is our wisdom), the present is received (it is where we find possibility), and our future is open because we are no longer victims or wanderers. We are now people of hope in an arena which seldom gives birth to hope. That is what Exodus is all about.

In the early '70's a concept that was developed by the Exodus Cadre provided three programs that operated in prison and a post-release program that provided support when men were released. The programs inside were the Exodus Cadre, the College Program, and the Contact Program was designed for short-term transitional preparation. The post-release program provided six weeks room rent, and fifty dollars a week stipend. Attached to the programs was a research consultant who measured the success of the participants upon release.

Some of the results were obvious and expected. The men coming out of the long-term programs had a much lower recidivism rate than those coming out of the short-term groups. One day, however, our research consultant brought to our attention an interesting pattern that developed in a group of about thirty men who had served long sentences and had been released. About two years out, an unconscious pattern began to develop that was common to all. It seemed that without being aware of it, they decided that they "can't make it out here," and they began a pattern of failure that pointed them in a direction to return to prison. The following elements were involved and common to all in the group.

1. Separation and alienation from family, spouse and friends.
2. Moved out to single room or street.
3. Set themselves up to get fired from job.
4. Re-established old relationships with people from prison.
5. Developed old habits and dependencies.

The time element seemed particularly significant with this group. This process seemed to begin right around the beginning of the second year. It also wasn't tied to success or failure. Many of the men were considered to be doing quite well. Some concluded at the time that there is a big difference between short-term and long-term success.