

XII. Why Did the Israelites Cross the Sea?

20-Aug-06 Exodus 12:29-42; 13:17-14:31

Theme: The LORD leads Israel through the Red Sea and destroys the army of Egypt to declare His holy name and gain glory throughout the earth.

Key Verses: Exodus 14:13-14 ¹³And Moses said to the people, “Do not be afraid. Stand still, and see the salvation of the LORD, which He will accomplish for you today. For the Egyptians whom you see today, you shall see again no more forever. ¹⁴The LORD will fight for you, and you shall hold your peace.”

Review

Last week we took a “legal break” to study three pieces of legislation concerning the redemption of Israel out of Egypt: 1) the Passover; 2) the Feast of Unleavened Bread; and 3) the laws of the Firstborn. The Passover celebrates the deliverance of Israel from the tenth plague – the death of the firstborn. The sacrifice of a substitute—the Passover Lamb—and the application of its blood on the doorway of each Israelite home pictures expiation (satisfaction) and propitiation (covering) for sin. Ultimately, all the details of the Passover feast find their fulfillment in Jesus Christ, our Passover Lamb.

The Feast of Unleavened Bread continues the Passover celebration for another seven days. Again, the purpose is to remind the people of God of His great work of redemption in the exodus. The command to remove leaven from each household symbolizes for us the Christian life – leaving behind the leaven of sin and darkness in Egypt and moving forward as a new creation, walking in faith and righteousness.

The laws of the Firstborn remind us that we are not our own; we have been bought with a great price, the precious blood of Jesus Christ (1 Pe. 1:18-19). We have been claimed by God and are called to serve Him by leading holy lives in accordance to His Word.

All three subjects point us to the exact same conclusion. We are to “remember the feast” – that is, remember our salvation through Jesus Christ. We are called to meditate on our great salvation, to contemplate what Christ has done for us. We are called to tell others about our redemption, especially teaching our covenant children what Christ has accomplished. And we are to live lives worthy of our calling, walking in holiness and righteousness, being sanctified more and more to the image of Christ. We have been saved for a purpose – to glorify God. All this and more is signified in our observance of the Lord’s Supper, the New Testament counterpart to these Old Testament regulations. Let us live our Christian lives to the glory of God and “remember the feast.”

Introduction

Q. Why did the rooster cross the road? A. To prove he wasn’t a chicken.

You’ve probably heard a thousand variations on the old joke, “Why did the chicken cross the road?” I’ve modeled the title of today’s lesson on that joke: “Why Did the Israelites Cross the Sea?” And just like the standard answer to the joke, the answer is the same for ancient Israel: to get to the other side. But there’s more to the story than simply crossing the sea. As we study the exodus and the parting of the Red Sea, let’s be alert for why God leads Israel through the Red Sea and drowns the Egyptians: it is for His own glory. It’s always about the glory of God.

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A. Departing Egypt (12:29-42)

1. *Plague 10: Firstborn (12:29-30)*

After our detour last week to study the theology surrounding the exodus, we finally come to the events themselves. Exodus 12:29-30 gives a matter of fact accounting of the tenth plague – the death of the firstborn of Egypt. The plague is executed exactly as foretold (11:4-8). As we saw last week, God is exercising His right over the firstborn. The firstborn of Israel are kept safe under the sign of blood, redeemed by the sacrifice of the Passover lamb. However, the firstborn of Egypt do not have the same protection. The LORD strikes down all the firstborn of Egypt, from the highest to lowest. Not even the Egyptian animals escape the judgment of God.

We've already seen how this final plague is an example of the exact justice of God. Long ago, the Egyptians had tried to slaughter the children of Israel by throwing them into the Nile River (1:22). Now at last, God has responded in direct retribution for the sins of all Egypt. Since the nation of Israel was God's "firstborn son" (4:22), God exacted judgment upon the firstborn sons of Egypt. In another example of "poetic justice," the cries of Israel during their many decades of enslavement (*cp.* 2:23; 3:7, 9) are offset by the "great cry in Egypt" (12:30). The Israelites had cried out underneath the sinful oppression of Egypt; Egypt now cried out in response to the just wrath of God.

2. *Farewell to Pharaoh (12:31-36)*

This plague was the straw that broke the Pharaoh's back. Previously, Pharaoh had refused to let Israel leave, or he tried to reach a compromise that still left him in control. No more. Pharaoh has been totally defeated, and he capitulates fully. His communication to Moses is likely through courtiers, since Moses had declared they would never again meet face to face (10:29).

Listen to Pharaoh's first four commands: "Rise up ... go out ... go ... serve" (12:31). He sounds like the proprietor of a "going-out-of-business sale" – everyone and everything must go! The men must go. The women must go. The children must go. Even the herds and flocks must go. "At long last Pharaoh acknowledge the LORD and His supremacy over all things" (Bentley). Ryken makes this application:

Pharaoh's little concession speech stands as a warning to anyone who chooses to resist God's will. For all his hardness of heart Pharaoh gained nothing. In the end he had to accept everything on God's terms anyway. So why not give in to God in the first place? It is much better not to resist His claim on your life but simply to accept His plan and His purpose.

Pharaoh even makes one last attempt to receive a blessing in the midst of all the judgment he has received. There is no record that Moses honored the request and blessed Pharaoh, because Pharaoh did not deserve to be blessed. He remained under the judgment of God. Pharaoh had not changed; he had not repented of his sins. He is still seeking relief from distress rather than forsaking his rebellion. Soon enough he would once again seek to destroy Israel (14:5-6), demonstrating the hardness of his heart to the very end.

We've previously seen how God predicted He would turn the favor of the Egyptians toward the Israelites so that the people of God could plunder them (3:21-22). The fulfillment is given in 12:33-36. The Egyptians urge the Israelites to leave, and freely give of their possessions to the Hebrews. Israel leaves Egypt like a victorious army, full of plunder and the spoils of war. This is consistent with the original prophecy God gave to Abraham centuries before when He declared

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that Abraham’s descendants would “come out with great possessions” (Gen. 15:14). The use of military language here and later on (*cp.* 12:41; 13:18) indicates that God’s people have won the victory over Egypt. God has been fighting a spiritual war, and His army is victorious, marching out with the plunder of Egypt.

3. *The Journey Begins (12:37-42)*

“The journey of a thousand miles begins with the first step.” The first leg of the march for the children of Israel begins when they leave Rameses, a city they built (1:11), and travel to Succoth, perhaps a distance of 15 miles (Mackay). They leave with their flocks and herds, described as *kabed*, or “a great deal of livestock” (12:38). This Hebrew word for “heavy” gets used quite a lot – God made Pharaoh’s heart heavy, and He made the possessions of Israel heavy as well.

The Israelites also leave with their unleavened bread (12:39), consistent with the instructions for the Feast of Unleavened Bread. Thus, we see that the physical departure of Israel is linked directly to the instructions for the memorial feasts of Passover and Unleavened Bread. In fact, this linkage is so important that it is repeated twice: “It is a night of solemn observance to the LORD for bringing them out of the land of Egypt. This is that night of the LORD, a solemn observance for all the children of Israel throughout their generations” (12:42). The theology of the feasts of Israel is rooted in actual, historical events. Likewise, the theology of our faith in Jesus Christ is grounded in His human life, death, and resurrection – events that really occurred.

The number of Israelite men who departed on that day is listed as 600,000 (12:37). When you estimate the number of women and children who also departed, the total size of the nation of Israel was perhaps two to three million. Some commentators think this number is too high to be believable, so they try to retranslate the word for “thousand” into “clans,” suggesting that 600 clans left Egypt. Of course, the Pentateuch backs up this round number with the census in Numbers, in which 603,550 men are counted by clans (Num. 2:32; *cp.* Ex. 38:26). Therefore, it is best for us to trust this number as a real figure, marveling in God’s grace that could multiply seventy souls into this great army within only a few centuries.

In addition to the ethnic Israelites, a “mixed multitude went up with them also” (12:38). The Hebrew word for this group is literally “swarm,” the same word used to describe the mixture of flies in the fifth plague (8:25). Perhaps this group included other slaves from different backgrounds as well as believing Egyptians. Ultimately, this group is described as causing trouble within the congregation of Israel (Num. 11:4), but in that failing they were no different than the ethnic Hebrews!

At long last, after 430 years in Egypt (but right on schedule!), the descendants of Abraham are headed back to Canaan (12:41). What a joyous day that must have been! Of course, like the Greek epic *The Odyssey*, there would be many twists and turns and years of wandering before they reached their final destination. And yet, the journey had begun.

B. Journey to the Wilderness (13:17-22)

1. *The Way of the Wilderness (13:17-20)*

The journey continues in the second half of chapter 13, after the instructions on Passover, Unleavened Bread, and the firstborn. The first item of interest we should note is that God is leading His people. They are not wandering about aimlessly. They have a guide who knows

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exactly where He is going. He also knows where He is not going. Notice that before we are told where God leads Israel, we are told where He doesn't lead them: "God did not lead them by the way of the land of the Philistines, although that was near" (13:17a).

This rejected way is often called the *Via Maris*, the "way of the sea." It was the coastal road that led directly from Egypt to Palestine, through the territory of the Philistines. It was the shortest route from Egypt to the land of Canaan and onward into Asia. It was the obvious road to take. An army the size of Israel could easily have traveled the distance in two weeks or less. However, it was not the way the LORD wanted to take His people.

Why is the shorter road rejected? God gives the following explanation: "Lest perhaps the people change their minds when they see war, and return to Egypt" (13:17b). The *Via Maris* was the shorter road, but it was also a heavily guarded road. Egypt maintained forts and garrisons along this road. At the end of the road were the Philistines, who would be a thorn in the side of future generations of Israel for centuries. The quick road was the dangerous road. No doubt the children of Israel would have faced military challenges along this path. Although they were marching in the formation of an army (the "orderly ranks" of 13:18), they were not yet truly a military force. They were just a bunch of freed slaves.

God knew the Israelites were not yet ready for war. Soon they would have to be, as they faced the Amalekites en route to Sinai (17:8-16). "God intended to give them a year of military boot camp while camped at Mt. Sinai to make them into an effective fighting force" (Jordan). Ultimately, they would become warriors as they conquered the Promised Land. But not today.

And so God takes them by a different path, the longer path, the road less traveled. And that road made all the difference, for God led them "by way of the wilderness of the Red Sea" (13:18).

²⁰So they took their journey from Succoth and camped in Etham at the edge of the wilderness (Exodus 13:20).

God led His people into the wilderness. Surely that must resonate with us. We always want to take shortcuts in life; we want to run the victory laps but don't want to put in the training. God led Moses into the wilderness for forty years of training before calling him to lead Israel out of Egypt. And the first destination of God's people once out of Egypt is not the Promised Land, but the wilderness. God's people need to be trained. The shortest way is not always the best way.

God has another purpose for leading the people to the wilderness of the Red Sea, a purpose that becomes apparent in chapter 14. He didn't just lead them south to avoid Philistines; He led them in this direction to draw Pharaoh into a trap. God had one final wonder to perform against Egypt at the Red Sea.

The Red Sea in Hebrew is *yam suph*, which literally means "sea of reeds" or "Papyrus Sea." If you look at a map of the region, you will notice that the modern Red Sea ends in two arms on either side of the Sinai Peninsula: the eastern arm is the Gulf of Aqaba, while the western branch is the Gulf of Suez. Traditionally, the Red Sea crossing is thought to be across this western arm of Suez. However, this part of the Red Sea does not contain any papyrus reeds; they only grow in the marshy areas and lakes north of the Gulf of Suez. Thus, some commentators believe that the Red Sea crossing occurred at one of these northern Bitter Lakes. However, Currid states that recent studies indicate *yam suph* does indeed refer to the Red Sea and Gulf of Suez (*cp.* 1 Kgs. 9:26, where *yam suph* is used to describe the location of Solomon's port on the Gulf of Aqaba). Ryken suggests that in Moses' day, the level of the Red Sea was higher, and the current day

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marshes and Bitter Lakes north of the Gulf of Suez were actually part of the Red Sea at that time. Regardless of the exact location of the Red Sea crossing, we can be assured that God led them to the right spot at the right time for the right reasons.

In 13:19, we learn that the bones of Joseph were carried out of Egypt by the children of Israel. This was done in fulfillment of Joseph's dying wish (Gen. 50:25). This is another connection back to the book of Genesis and an indication that the events of Exodus are all part of God's great plan of redemption for His people. Joseph had faith that God would bring Israel up out of Egypt into Canaan (Heb. 11:22). The bones of Joseph, carried by his descendants, are thus a symbol of God's faithfulness to keep His promises.

2. The Cloud and Pillar of the LORD (13:21-22)

In the final two verses of Exodus 13 we learn more about how the LORD led Israel:

²¹And the LORD went before them by day in a pillar of cloud to lead the way, and by night in a pillar of fire to give them light, so as to go by day and night. ²²He did not take away the pillar of cloud by day or the pillar of fire by night from before the people (Exodus 13:21-22).

I believe we should understand the "pillar of cloud" and the "pillar of fire" as one manifestation or theophany of God, rather than two. Thus, the pillar of fire is contained within the pillar of cloud. During daytime, the brightness of the fire is obscured by sunlight, while at night the glow of the fire shines forth through the cloud. The glory of the LORD represented by the cloud and fire is often called the *Shekinah* glory (*cp.* 16:10; 40:34). Jordan points out that this is the same glory cloud that Ezekiel saw in his vision of the mobile throne of God (Ez. 1:4-28). "It is an outward display of God's inward glory" (Ryken). It is also a visible symbol of God's presence in the midst of His people.

God's presence in the Old Testament is sometimes portrayed by cloud or smoke associated with fire (*e.g.*, Gen. 15:17; Ex. 19:16-19; Ez. 1:4). We have similar portraits in the New Testament as well (*e.g.*, Mt. 17:5; Acts 1:9). The cloud speaks of God's impenetrability (Lam. 3:44) while the fire speaks of God's illuminating presence and glory.

This is the second time God's glory has shone in the book of Exodus. The first time was when the Angel of the LORD spoke to Moses in the burning bush (3:2ff). The "Angel of God" is also present in the cloud and fire leading Israel (14:19). But this theophany of God is only one in a series of manifestations of God's glory. Later on, God's glory will be intensified at Mt. Sinai, where the cloud, smoke, fire, and thunder of God's presence will be overwhelming (19:16-19).

In addition to being a visible symbol of God's presence, the cloud and fire provide Israel with guidance day and night. Wherever God's pillar went, the people of Israel followed. God spoke to Moses and Aaron out of the pillar (*e.g.*, Num. 12:5), giving them verbal guidance as well as navigational guidance. The pillar also served to protect Israel: the cloud by day provided shade (*cp.* Ps. 121:5-6), while the fire by night provided light and warmth. Furthermore, God's pillar shielded Israel from her enemies (14:19-20). What a gracious display of God's presence, glory, and goodness to His people!

It is tempting to wish for the good old days and such a visible expression of God's presence in our midst. If only God would give us a visible sign of what we should do and where we should go. However, we have something much more glorious than a physical pillar of cloud and fire in

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the sky to guide us and protect us. We have the very presence of God Himself within us. “He has given us the fire of His Spirit, and now we have His glorious presence with us all day and all night. It is as if the column of cloud and the pillar of fire have come right inside us!” (Ryken).

C. The Pursuit of Pharaoh (14:1-12)

1. *Camping by the Sea (14:1-4)*

This spring, I went tent camping with my children for the first time. We had a guide with us for the trip, and although he didn't glow at night, Mr. Johnston did just about everything else! The very first thing John did was figure out where we were going to go camping; then he reserved the spot and gave us directions. That's exactly what God does in the first two verses of chapter 14. God tells Moses to “camp before Pi Hahiroth (‘region of salt marshes’), between Migdol (‘watchtower’) and the sea, opposite Baal Zephon (‘Lord or master of the north’); you shall camp before it by the sea” (Ex. 14:2). Sounds like a lovely camping vacation with a waterfront view!

However, these specific directions apparently lead to a “dead-end” where Israel is unable to advance further out of Egypt. In addition, the path Israel takes to their campground is full of backtracking and seemingly aimless wandering. God does this on purpose (14:3). To the casual Egyptian observer, it would appear that Israel was lost at the edge of the wilderness, leaderless and directionless. They seemed bewildered and confused, perhaps uncertain where to go to find provisions. In other words, Israel looks like ripe picking for Pharaoh and his army.

That is exactly the impression that God wanted to give to Pharaoh. He had one last wonder to perform, and Pharaoh needed to come calling. So for one final time God hardens the hard heart of Pharaoh. Why? For the same reason as all the other wonders performed in Egypt: so “that the Egyptians may know that I am the LORD” (14:4). Ironically, the honor or glory that God seeks is the same word *kabed* which means “heavy.” God has given Pharaoh a *kabed* heart so that He may get all of the *kabed* (glory).

2. *Pursuing by Chariot (14:5-9)*

Pharaoh steps into the trap. He and his servants “come to their senses” when they hear the intelligence report on the departed slaves. All of a sudden, the economic disaster of losing the cheap labor force, piled upon all the other economic disasters of the plagues, dawns on Pharaoh: “Why have we done this, that we have let Israel go from serving us?” (14:5). Motyer points out that the spiritual battle still continued: “The contest was a matter of ownership. Who had the right to claim ownership of Israel – the enslaving, genocidal king who had long been their master or their divine LORD who had come to Egypt to claim, redeem, and deliver them?”

So Pharaoh musters his army and they set off in hot pursuit. In addition to his elite corps of 600 chariots, Pharaoh had many more ordinary chariots and marching men. Currid speculates that “probably the greatest fighting force in the world was preparing to pursue them.” And pursue they did. With frightening speed, they drew near to the campground of Pi Hahiroth, that marshy region next to the sea where the Israelites were.

3. *Complaining by Israel (14:10-12)*

The language of verse 10 is important: “the Israelites lifted their eyes, and behold...” (14:10). This is the language of observation, of judgment. Throughout the Old Testament, when you lift up your eyes and you look and you behold something, you are making an evaluation or judgment

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about what you see. The Israelites are no different. They behold the approach of the enemy, they evaluate their escape options and discover none, and they reach the conclusion that they are in a lot of trouble: “they were very afraid” (14:10).

When you are in trouble and very afraid, what should you do? Well, of course, the correct answer is that you should go to the Lord in prayer. And Israel does that ... sort of. Verse 10 says they “cried out to the LORD.” Since that is the same phrase that initiated God’s action on their behalf when they “cried out” in Egypt (2:23, 3:7), this sounds like a good thing. However, their crying out is not exactly faith-based praying; instead, it is more like fear-based whining.

The people of God begin to kvetch. This is not the first time (*cp.* 2:14; 5:21), nor will it be the last. In fact, it is really the start of a long tradition of complaining and murmuring against God and Moses by Israel in the wilderness (*e.g.*, 15:24; 16:3; 17:2; 32:1; etc.). In the typical Hebrew complaint, they follow the Jeopardy route and phrase their answers in the form of questions:

¹¹Then they said to Moses, “Because there were no graves in Egypt, have you taken us away to die in the wilderness? Why have you so dealt with us, to bring us up out of Egypt? ¹²Is this not the word that we told you in Egypt, saying, ‘Let us alone that we may serve the Egyptians’? For it would have been better for us to serve the Egyptians than that we should die in the wilderness” (Exodus 14:11-12).

How ironic is their first question? Egypt was a land obsessed with death – there were graves and pyramids everywhere! Notice how they follow the sin of Adam and “blame-shift” (*cp.* Gen. 3:12) their problems onto Moses. Apparently it’s all Moses’ fault that they are about to die in the wilderness. Everyone was perfectly happy in slavery until Moses came along and dragged them into this mess. Of course, the Israelites have conveniently forgotten their miraculous exodus and redemption through the hand of God! All of their complaints are merely a distraction to hide the essence of the matter: their lack of faith. The Psalmist sums it up accurately: they “rebelled by the sea—the Red Sea” (Ps. 106:7b).

D. The Salvation of the LORD (14:13-31)

1. Preparation (14:13-18)

¹³And Moses said to the people, “Do not be afraid. Stand still, and see the salvation of the LORD, which He will accomplish for you today. For the Egyptians whom you see today, you shall see again no more forever. ¹⁴The LORD will fight for you, and you shall hold your peace” (Exodus 14:13-14).

In his response to the people’s complaint, Moses emphasizes the word “see,” using it three times in verse 13. Just as the Israelites looked up and beheld the advancing Egyptians, all they had to do was lift up their heads and “see the salvation of the LORD.” Their evaluation of the strength Egyptians had led to fear and complaining. Now Moses commands them to evaluate what God is about to do on their behalf. Notice what Moses doesn’t say – he doesn’t tell the people to do anything to protect themselves. He doesn’t tell them to build a wall, or dig a ditch, or circle the wagons. He simply tells them to watch God in action. Currid points that the Israelites “have nothing to contribute. They are spectators. Salvation is by God’s power, by His grace alone.”

There is one other point to mention regarding Moses’ response to Israel. It is not a word of comfort; it is a word of rebuke for their weak faith and their complaining attitude. He ends his

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rebuke with rather sharp words. The NKJV translation is “hold your peace,” but the Hebrew phrase is better translated as “you be quiet!” or even better, “shut up!” (Enns).

Moses’ rebuke of Israel seems justified. That’s why God’s apparent rebuke of Moses seems so unexpected: “And the LORD said to Moses, “Why do you cry to Me?” (14:15). The best way to understand this rebuke is to see Moses in his mediatorial role. Moses as the prophet of God represents Israel before the LORD. When God rebukes Moses for lack of faith, what He is really doing is rebuking all of Israel, the people that Moses represents.

God then proceeds to tell Moses the plan of salvation (14:15-17). Moses is to take the rod of God and stretch it out over the sea. God’s power will divide the sea and provide a path of salvation for Israel. Furthermore, God will continue his heart-hardening actions with respect to Pharaoh and the Egyptians and lead Egypt to destruction.

What is the purpose of this final wonder directed against Egypt?

¹⁷So I will gain honor over Pharaoh and over all his army, his chariots, and his horsemen.

¹⁸Then the Egyptians shall know that I am the LORD, when I have gained honor for Myself over Pharaoh, his chariots, and his horsemen (Ex. 14:17b-18).

This is the final battle in the spiritual war with Egypt. Pharaoh had declared that he did not know the LORD (5:2), and God has been demonstrating ever since who He is and what He does. God is destroying the army of Egypt for His own glory (*kabed*). This has been a major theme in the exodus and repeated time and time again (7:5, 17; 8:19, 22; 10:2; 14:4, 18, 25). “The chief end of man is to glorify God and enjoy Him forever.” Ironically, Pharaoh is going to glorify God at the Red Sea, but unfortunately, Pharaoh will not enjoy Him forever.

2. *Crossing (14:19-22)*

In anticipation of the Red Sea crossing, the presence of God, personified by the “Angel of God” and symbolized by the pillar of cloud and fire, moved from in front of the host of Israel to behind them (14:19). Both aspects of the pillar are employed by God as it camps between the people of Israel and the Egyptian army. The pillar of fire provides light to the Israelite camp during the night, while the Egyptian army is covered in darkness and confusion (14:20). Symbolically, we have the people of God in light and the enemies of God in darkness. In other words, the presence of God is a blessing of salvation unto Israel, while it is a curse of judgment upon Egypt.

Now, you would think that Pharaoh would have remembered this play in God’s playbook. The last time the Egyptians were cloaked in darkness, it was the ninth plague (10:21-29). Close on the heels of that supernatural darkness came the death of the firstborn in the tenth plague (12:29-30). The pattern is about to repeat itself: darkness followed by death. Pharaoh’s heart is so hard and rebellious that he does not make the connection.

The dividing of the Red Sea is accomplished when Moses holds the staff of God over the sea and God sends an east wind. This is the same east wind that brought the locusts of the eighth plague (10:13). The sea did not part all at once, but gradually during the night (14:22). Currid points out that since the Israelites were on the west side of the sea, the east wind began dividing the waters on the far shore first. The Israelites would have to wait all night for the sea to be completely divided before they could cross through the middle of it.

Obviously, the parting of the Red Sea is a mighty miracle. Mackay estimates that the walls of water on either side of the path through the sea were likely several miles apart in order to permit

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the entire nation of Israel to pass across. But perhaps the most interesting detail of the miracle is that the land upon which they crossed was dry (14:21). There were no pools of water, no mud, no moisture at all. The ground was absolute dry, as if the sea had never been there. “So the children of Israel went into the midst of the sea on the dry ground, and the waters were a wall to them on their right hand and on their left” (14:22).

We’ve noted through our studies of the plagues the theme of de-creation; that is, a reversal of the creation order in judgment against Egypt. Here at the Red Sea, we have a deliberate echo of creation once again, signifying that Israel is God’s new creation. On the first day of creation, God brought forth light (Gen. 1:3-5). On the second day of creation, the waters are divided (Gen. 1:6-8). And on the third day of creation, the dry land appears from the midst of the water (Gen. 1:9-10). The same pattern is repeated here: the light of God’s fiery pillar is followed by a division of waters and the emergence of dry land. Just as God created the original world, He is in the process of transforming Israel into His new creation. This is the same process we go through when Jesus Christ redeems us: “if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation” (2 Cor. 5:17).

3. Pursuit (14:23-29)

Apparently God lifts the cloud of darkness over Egypt enough to let Pharaoh realize that his prey is escaping between the supernatural sea walls. Without hesitation, Pharaoh’s army follows in pursuit. The phrase “all Pharaoh’s horses, his chariots, and his horsemen” (14:23), echoes the earlier description of Pharaoh’s pursuit of Israel (14:9). The text is re-emphasizing to us that the entire army of Pharaoh entered the Red Sea. However, it is unclear whether Pharaoh himself entered the Red Sea or not.

It was in the third watch of the night (2:00 a.m. to 6:00 a.m.), as dawn was approaching, that the wheels of the Egyptian army literally fell off (14:24-25). The mighty chariots of the Egyptians suffered mechanical difficulties: they foundered and got stuck and lost their wheels. Psalm 77:16-20 describes the crossing of the Red Sea in highly poetic fashion; those verses indicate that God sent a rainstorm and earthquake to defeat the Egyptian army. While the Israelites crossed the sea on foot across dry ground with relative ease, the Egyptian army struggled in their chariots across a muddy, rain-soaked, trembling path. The advance of Egypt ground to a halt and confusion reigned.

The Hebrew text translated as “they drove them with difficulty” literally says in Hebrew “He caused them to drive in heaviness” (14:25). If you guessed that the word for difficulty (“heaviness”) is related to our favorite Hebrew word *kabed*, you would be correct! Not only are the Egyptian’s hearts made heavy, but their chariots are made heavy too. And all of it is for the glory (*kabed*) of God.

At the last moment, the enormity and gravity of their situation hits the Egyptian army: “Let us flee from the face of Israel, for the LORD fights for them against the Egyptians” (14:25). The LORD had been fighting for Israel against Egypt for ten long plagues before this Red Sea confrontation. And it is only now, when their doom is sealed, that they realize the vanity in struggling against the God of all creation. How foolhardy it was to challenge God, and yet that is exactly what Pharaoh did.

Verse 26 is the command of God to Moses to reverse the parting of the Red Sea, causing the water to flow back over the Egyptian army. Moses is instructed to stretch out his hand once

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more, ostensibly holding the staff of God as the symbol of the LORD's power. The refrain "upon the Egyptians, on their chariots, and on their horseman" (14:26) again emphasizes the futility of Egypt against God and the totality of their destruction.

As dawn breaks, as the Day of the LORD arrives, judgment falls upon the army of Egypt. The Egyptians worshipped Amon-Ra, the sun-god, but as the sun rises in the east Amon-Ra is powerless to prevent the disaster. The walls of sea water that God had piled up are now released in a tremendous flood of rushing water to cover Pharaoh's men. It is the LORD God of Israel, Yahweh, who is triumphant: "So the LORD overthrew the Egyptians in the midst of the sea" (14:27). Lest we believe any of the Egyptians escaped, we have the refrain repeated: "Then the waters returned and covered the chariots, the horsemen, and all the army of Pharaoh that came into the sea after them. Not so much as one of them remained" (14:28).

4. Salvation (14:30-31)

³⁰So the LORD saved Israel that day out of the hand of the Egyptians, and Israel saw the Egyptians dead on the seashore. ³¹Thus Israel saw the great work which the LORD had done in Egypt; so the people feared the LORD, and believed the LORD and His servant Moses (Exodus 14:30-31).

Q. Why did the Israelites cross the Sea? A. For the glory of God to be displayed (14:4, 17, 18).

It was all about the glory. In the salvation of Israel and the destruction of Egypt at the Red Sea, God's glory is displayed to the entire world. Forty years later, the inhabitants of Jericho and Canaan had heard of God's glory at the Red Sea and trembled in fear (Jos. 2:9-10). Pharaoh at long last knew who the LORD is and what He does: He redeems and rescues His people and He destroys His enemies.

Israel also knew the LORD in a more wonderful way after the Red Sea. Israel "saw" what the LORD had done in and to Egypt through the plagues and Red Sea. They evaluated who the LORD is and what He does. And unlike Pharaoh, they responded appropriately. They feared the LORD, meaning they worshipped Him. They trusted in God and even in His servant, Moses (at least for the time being). God is glorified through the response of His people. Praise the LORD!

Conclusion

In conclusion, I just want to relate a funny story retold by both Currid and Ryken:

Donald Bridge tells the story of an American congregation which included some African-Americans accustomed to answering the preacher as he went along. On one occasion they were addressed by someone with "liberal" leanings, tending to dismiss the miracles of the Bible. He referred in his sermon to the Israelites crossing the Red Sea. "Praise de Lord," someone shouted. "Takin' all dem children through de deep waters. What a mighty miracle!" The preacher frowned. "It was not a miracle," he explained condescendingly. "They were doubtless in marsh-land, the tide was ebbing, and the children of Israel picked their way across in six inches of water." "Praise de Lord!" shouted the man unabashed. "Drownin' all dem Egyptians in six inches of water. What a mighty miracle!" Amen.

Close in Prayer.

Next week: Lesson 13 – The Song of the Sea – Ex. 15:1-21