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# The Baptism of Israel

## Exodus 14

**Introduction** A little boy attended Sunday School for the first time. On the way home after church, his mother asked him what had he learned in Sunday School? The little boy said that they had learned the story of the battle between Egypt and Israel at the Red Sea. He went on to relate how the people of Israel were trapped up against the Red Sea. So Moses called in the Navy engineers who, through the night, built a pontoon bridge across the Red Sea. While the tanks and armored vehicles guarded the entrance, the people of Israel crossed over to the other side and arrived safely. After the military units crossed over, the Egyptians followed them onto the pontoon bridge. Then Moses called in the Air Force who bombed the pontoon bridge so that the Egyptians, with all their tanks, trucks and armored vehicles, fell into the sea and drowned. The mother said, "Surely that's not how they told the story." The boy said, "Well, no. But the way they told it, you would never believe it."

Great stories usually have a single climatic moment. Exodus has three grand moments of drama and vivid displays of God's power and presence. We are here at the first of these grand moments. Our story this morning, true in all its parts, is one of the most referred to narrative types in the Old Testament. Redemption for Israel meant leaving Egypt with its slavery and bondage. It meant passing through the Red Sea and beginning the journey to the Promised Land. In this way, the rest of the Bible takes this text and illuminates it ever more brightly until the Messiah, the Lord Jesus Christ. He Himself, God's new Israel, comes up out of Egypt is baptized to fulfill all righteousness and begins His own wilderness testing. Then, as we will see later, this story is also mapped over our own, personal story and testimony.

This is such a dramatic moment that it has filled folklore, movies, songs and sermons for generations upon generations. However, as with all great Bible narratives, these often have twisted the story and turned it into something that serves the producer's agenda. Even Reggae musician Bob Marley, in one of his songs, longs for another Moses, another deliverer from oppression and slavery.<sup>9</sup> So we must pay close attention to the actual narrative itself. Let me tweak you with a simple question: did Israel pass through the Red Sea during the day time or the night time? The answer may well surprise you.

This is a moment not so different from our own. We will draw great hope and encouragement from the faithfulness of God. He will keep His promises. He will complete the work He has begun. All God's people will be redeemed.

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<sup>9</sup> Thanks to Phil Ryken in his commentary for this illustration.

**Danger from the Wicked****(v.1-20)**

James, in the New Testament tells us to “Count it all joy when you fall into many kinds of trials...” Many of the trials faced by God’s people come as a direct result of being sinned against by wicked people. Israel’s deliverance from Egypt is about to turn into flight from an angry Pharaoh and his hordes. Yet God is present in the trouble.

**In the Providence of God****(v.1-5)**

Then the LORD said to Moses, <sup>2</sup> “Tell the people of Israel to turn back and encamp in front of Pi-hahiroth, between Migdol and the sea, in front of Baal-zephon; you shall encamp facing it, by the sea. <sup>3</sup> For Pharaoh will say of the people of Israel, ‘They are wandering in the land; the wilderness has shut them in.’ <sup>4</sup> And I will harden Pharaoh’s heart, and he will pursue them, and I will get glory over Pharaoh and all his host, and the Egyptians shall know that I am the LORD.” And they did so.

God is leading them in a circuitous route that is placing them right in danger from the wicked. God tells Moses for Israel to make camp on the shores of the Red Sea. God in His direct leading has put them in danger. This is His good, sovereign and wise providence. They are now penned up against the Red Sea. They don’t know this yet. They only know where they are to camp.

Some have questioned whether the translation ought to be Red Sea or Reed Sea. Scholars, generally attempting to minimize the miracle, have suggested that this is the northern Reed Sea, a much shallower body of water filled with papyrus reeds. However, elsewhere, the Hebrew is used to refer to what is clearly in those contexts the Red Sea, the body of water extending down into southern Egypt that divides the Sinai Peninsula from Egypt. Further, it is hard to see how what follows could actually take place in small, shallow lake – why would they be trapped? It is best to accept the traditional route and words of the text. Israel is between a powerful army and an impassable sea.

God is also moving in the heart of Pharaoh to harden his heart and send him in pursuit of the Israelites. Even after the long devastating sequence of plagues, God is going to further humble Pharaoh and bring his reign to an ignominious end. God is going to have the unquestioning final word over Pharaoh. So, in order to set Pharaoh up for judgment, God hardens his heart and sends him scrambling after the Israelites.

God is telling all this to Moses. Moses is to lead the people to camp where they will be in most danger. It is one thing to do this unaware that Pharaoh is rallying his forces. It is quite another to do it knowing full well this particular encampment is a trap. It will give Israel no where to go as Egypt attacks them across the southern desert.

Why would Moses do this? Because God has declared that He intends to get glory from this. Doing this without knowing how God will deliver is difficult. However, faith hears God’s intent to glorify Himself and destroy Pharaoh. So faith simply does the commands of God assuming His wisdom should prevail. We must remember that the wisdom of God serving the purposes of His glory may not line up with the pro’s and con’s columns of our own decisions making. Obedience to God often involves risk. Wisdom from God is not always safe.

Where would modern missions be if the first generation weighed the pro's and con's and chose the safe course, the course with the least risk? Yet, the wisdom of God prevailed in hearts who then moved into enormous risk for the sake of the gospel.

### **By the Pursuit of the Pharaoh**

**(v.6-9)**

<sup>5</sup> When the king of Egypt was told that the people had fled, the mind of Pharaoh and his servants was changed toward the people, and they said, "What is this we have done, that we have let Israel go from serving us?" <sup>6</sup> So he made ready his chariot and took his army with him, <sup>7</sup> and took six hundred chosen chariots and all the other chariots of Egypt with officers over all of them. <sup>8</sup> And the LORD hardened the heart of Pharaoh king of Egypt, and he pursued the people of Israel while the people of Israel were going out defiantly. <sup>9</sup> The Egyptians pursued them, all Pharaoh's horses and chariots and his horsemen and his army, and overtook them encamped at the sea, by Pi-hahiroth, in front of Baal-zephon.

God hardened Pharaoh's heart so that he and all his armies rose up to pursue Israel. They began to discuss what had happened. How could they have let Israel go? What were they thinking? Why would they allow such a massive slave population simply to leave? How were they going to rebuild their ruined country?

The Pharaoh gathers up the elite of his army. That includes the fabled and feared Egyptian fast attack chariots. These were light, quick, and maneuverable. They carried two soldiers, one a driver and one an archer and spearman. The wheels had knives mounted on them that would scythe through standing armies, much less a crowded civilian encampment. He gathered up the elite of these chariot forces and what army he could muster to move fast. He sped out after the Israelites. God's hardening hand continued to squeeze his wicked heart until hatred for God became venom against God's people.

They came upon the Israelites at the encampment where God had placed them. While this exact location is not presently known, it would certainly have been known to the first and second generation Israelites, the original recipients of the book of Exodus. Moses' point here is to show that God has brought the Egyptians and Israelites to meet exactly where God had planned.

### **With Fear and Complaining from the People**

**(v.10-14)**

<sup>10</sup> When Pharaoh drew near, the people of Israel lifted up their eyes, and behold, the Egyptians were marching after them, and they feared greatly. And the people of Israel cried out to the LORD. <sup>11</sup> They said to Moses, "Is it because there are no graves in Egypt that you have taken us away to die in the wilderness? What have you done to us in bringing us out of Egypt? <sup>12</sup> Is not this what we said to you in Egypt, 'Leave us alone that we may serve the Egyptians'? For it would have been better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die in the wilderness." <sup>13</sup> And Moses said to the people, "Fear not, stand firm, and see the salvation of the LORD, which he will work for you today. For the Egyptians whom you see today, you shall never see again. <sup>14</sup> The LORD will fight for you, and you have only to be silent."

The people doubt God's promises, power and leadership so that they are afraid and complain. They look at their situation and the danger they are in. Their eyes are primarily on their troubles. The way they cry out to the Lord and to Moses is *not commendable*. This is not a cry for help arising from trust and reliance on God. This is a cry of despair and defeat. This is not godly perplexity seeking God's face for wisdom and answers. This is rebellion expressed in prayer.

Beloved, there is a kind of crying out to God in the midst of difficult situations that is not pleasing to God. It is possible, as Israel will demonstrate time after time, to pray and cry out to God in doubt, despair and defeat. It is possible to allow our heart idols to drive us to a sinful kind of praying. This may come as a shocking revelation to some of you. But I have heard many pray like this. There is a rebellion against God's providences and His transforming work that rejects the situation. It is a kind of praying that ends up blaming God and God's leaders for the trouble. Listen to me. Israel is exactly where they are supposed to be. Their praying here is sinful. And sometimes your praying is just like this. It expresses doubt, exhibits vain regret, displays rebellion and challenges God's wisdom and goodness. So, let us evaluate our own praying in trouble. Is the way you pray in trouble a deep and transforming expression of trust in God?

Notice that the attack on God is channeled through an attack on Moses. He has led them here. He is responsible for their leaving Egypt. Why couldn't he be satisfied with their lot there? Why would he lead all these people with their wives and children to this spot to die here? Would it have been better to serve in Egypt than to die in the wilderness?

Notice what is running through their hearts and learn to guard against this in our own.

*THERE IS A DISTORTED VIEW OF THEIR LIFE BEFORE DELIVERANCE.* They will emphasize the good in Egypt and play down the bad. The "before" is seen as better than the "after". Having an accurate assessment of the past and the present is essential for godly living. Distorting the truth always leads to sinful responses.

*THERE IS A CHALLENGE TO GOD'S ORDAINED LEADERSHIP.* Notice how when things go bad the Israelites will attack Moses and Aaron. It is their leadership that has gotten them into this trouble. At one level, that is true. But Moses and Aaron have been obeying God. They have led the people of God exactly as God required. So, this rebellion against the leadership is in fact a rebellion against God.

*THERE IS A DISTRUST OF GOD'S PROMISES AND HIS POWER.* This is the fundamental heart issue. God has promised to bring them to the Promised Land. He is not taking them all out into the wilderness to kill them all off. They simply doubt what God has said and what God has promised. This doubt is not caused by their situation. It is exposed by it. Now, it is expressed by this crying out to God and against Moses.

*THERE IS A FAILURE TO CONNECT WHAT GOD HAS DONE IN THE PAST WITH WHAT GOD IS WILL DO IN THE PRESENT.* In other words, they have intentionally disconnected the past faithfulness of God from their present trouble. It is a willful and sinful unwillingness to trust in God. They have doubted His Word and promises. They have disconnected their present troubles from His clearly demonstrated power for them in the past.

Moses' response is basically to tell them to be quiet, to be still. Stand still and stop running. Do not be afraid. The Lord will fight for you. The might of the

Egyptians will be seen no more. Watch the salvation of the Lord. Now the wording here is chosen very carefully. There would have been lots of words to choose instead of “salvation.” But God’s people are being challenged to trust God in such a way that they experience the saving power of God. Their desperate and defeated crying out is not going to bring about deliverance. Simple faith and trust in God that stills hearts and holds fast and fuels courage will experience, not the just the deliverance in this situation, but the very salvation God brings.

Further, this is the signaling by both Moses and certainly by the Holy Spirit that what is about to happen is not just a local event of national deliverance from a physical enemy. What will happen here is a small tableau in the larger redemptive-historical drama. The saving power of God for the delivering of His people from the world and sin is being played out in the shadows. God’s people will need to trust God even when it looks most hopeless. Here it is Egypt in the front and the Red Sea to their backs. One dark day it will be an apostate Israel allied with Rome resulting in a criminal’s execution of the innocent Son of God on a bloody cross. But it is in that very moment that we stand still, have faith, do not fear and look up with hope for the salvation of God is transpiring.

### **For God’s Purpose in their Trouble (v.15-18)**

<sup>15</sup> The LORD said to Moses, “Why do you cry to me? Tell the people of Israel to go forward. <sup>16</sup> Lift up your staff, and stretch out your hand over the sea and divide it, that the people of Israel may go through the sea on dry ground. <sup>17</sup> And I will harden the hearts of the Egyptians so that they shall go in after them, and I will get glory over Pharaoh and all his host, his chariots, and his horsemen. <sup>18</sup> And the Egyptians shall know that I am the LORD, when I have gotten glory over Pharaoh, his chariots, and his horsemen.”

The very danger and difficulty they are in is designed by God to serve His purpose to display His glory. They are here at this place in trouble. Egypt is here at this place thinking about victory. God has them all here for His own purpose that will not be thwarted.

The rebuke of Moses here almost seems unfair and harsh. But God is showing us something important. Moses is more than just the leader of the people. He stands as their mediator. When they fail, he has to bear the reproach. When God needs to correct His people, He will do it through the mediator He has ordained. Moses does not seem to chafe at this at all. In this, our Lord Jesus is also prefigured. The reproaches we were due fell on Him. He is our mediator. So our correction comes through the mediating work of Christ as it did the mediating work of Moses.

God basically says, “It is time to stop praying and to move forward.” When Charles Spurgeon preached on this verse, he said, “Far be it from me ever to say a word in disparagement of the holy, happy, heavenly exercise of prayer. But, beloved, there are times when prayer is not enough—when prayer itself is out of season.... When we have prayed over a matter to a certain degree, it then becomes sinful to tarry any longer; our plain duty is to carry our desires into action, and having asked God’s guidance, and having received divine power from on high, to go at once to our duty without any longer deliberation or delay.”

[Charles H. Spurgeon, “Forward! Forward! Forward!” (No. 548), *Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit* (Pasadena, TX: Pilgrim, 1973), quoted by P.Ryken].

God gives Moses the instruction and the interpretation for the moment. He is to stretch forth his rod over the sea. It will divide and Israel will pass through the sea on dry land. But God will harden Pharaoh’s heart so that he will follow Israel into annihilation. The deliverance of Israel and the destruction of Pharaoh through the waters of the Red Sea will get God immeasurable and eternal glory. He will be seen to be transcendently great over the powers of this world when He delivers His people through His judgment.

### **With God’s Protection through the Night (v.19-20)**

<sup>19</sup> Then the angel of God who was going before the host of Israel moved and went behind them, and the pillar of cloud moved from before them and stood behind them, <sup>20</sup> coming between the host of Egypt and the host of Israel. And there was the cloud and the darkness. And it lit up the night without one coming near the other all night.

The visible presence of God moves to separate the Egyptians from the Israelites. The pillar of fire and cloud moves from in front of Israel to behind Israel. As a mighty beacon, it lit the desert sands between the encampments through the night. So, the Egyptians hold until morning and Israel sleeps protected by the presence and power of God.

Moses explains that the pillar of fire and cloud is not just a physical or spiritual phenomenon, but rather is the very presence of God Himself. Here once again is the angel of God. As we have already seen, the angel of God here is most likely a preincarnate manifestation of Christ. This is not just any angel. This is not just an angel from heaven or an angel from God. This is the angel of God. Later, in many other references in the rest of Moses’ writings, it is clear that the pillar of cloud and fire is what it is because in it is God Himself. This pillar of fire will come into the tabernacle and rest on the mercy seat as the glory of the presence of God, the Shekinah.

### **Deliverance through Judgment (v.21-31)**

But this is the night of deliverance. God will deliver His people through judgment.

#### **The Power of God to Save (v.21-25)**

<sup>21</sup> Then Moses stretched out his hand over the sea, and the LORD drove the sea back by a strong east wind all night and made the sea dry land, and the waters were divided. <sup>22</sup> And the people of Israel went into the midst of the sea on dry ground, the waters being a wall to them on their right hand and on their left. <sup>23</sup> The Egyptians pursued and went in after them into the midst of the sea, all Pharaoh’s horses, his chariots, and his horsemen. <sup>24</sup> And in the morning watch the LORD in the pillar of fire and of cloud looked down on the Egyptian forces and threw the Egyptian forces into a panic, <sup>25</sup> clogging their chariot wheels so that they drove heavily. And the Egyptians said, “Let us flee from before Israel, for the LORD fights for them against the Egyptians.”

The rod of judgment is stretched out and opens the way through the sea. Moses obeyed God’s command immediately. In the evening, he stretches out his rod over the Red Sea. As the pillar hovered through the night to guard the Israelites, a mighty east wind from God blows across the Red Sea. God divides the waters

and the wind dries up the sea bottom into a roadway for the Jewish people. On either side, the waters piled up into enormous walls. The word here was often used to describe the massive fortifications of a city's walls.

So Moses and Aaron move down the bank and into the path through the sea. They march with confident trust. They lead the way. Is this a risky path? Of course, anyone could see that at any moment the walls of water could collapse and drown everyone. But the people of Israel move. In a long train, upwards of 2 million people and livestock and household goods snake down into the dry land path through the sea. Each family and clan follows the one ahead of it. In the dim distance ahead the mighty walls of water tower in the moonlight and the dark thread of humanity walk safely through.

Once again, God's people are saved through the very waters of judgment. God had not delivered them from their situation. God has delivered them through it. Just when it seemed impossibly hopeless, God moves with His power to do what could not possibly have been anticipated. Moses had to believe God when he stretched out his rod. The leaders of Israel had to believe God when they stepped down in between the towering walls of water. The people of God had to believe God when they followed where they were led. Here is God's salvation right through the dry land road through the bottom of the sea. Imagine the fear and awe as they walked through!

Ah, but in the distance, hear the clank of chariots, the rumble of marching feet and trotting hooves. The Egyptian army is on the move. They reach the edge of the Red Sea and see the dry path. Far off they can see the trailing groups of the Egyptians and Gentiles who were attached to the people of God. They seem not to hesitate. They begin to enter between the walls of water themselves in their haste to run down the fleeing Israelites. The pillar of fire hovers over the enemy and panics the horses so that the mobile Egyptian army is bogged down, preventing the foot bound Israelites from being overtaken. They are laboring hard as the chariot wheels seem to bog down. They drive harder and try to march faster. The Lord God Almighty is bringing all the Egyptian army down into the path through the Red Sea. Do they see their danger?

Listen to Psalm 77:16-20 where Asaph records his struggle with the Lord's faithfulness and his meditation on the story of the deliverance at the Red Sea.

When the waters saw you, O God, the waters saw you, they were afraid; indeed, the deep trembled. The clouds poured out water; the skies gave forth thunder; your arrows flashed on every side. The crash of your thunder was in the whirlwind; your lightnings lighted up the world; the earth trembled and shook. Your way was through the sea, your path through the great waters; yet your footprints were unseen. You led your people like a flock by the hand of Moses and Aaron. [ESV].

What a scene, particularly when you consider this is happening at night (don't believe all the paintings and drawings and children's pictures – this is happening during the night (see verse 27). Between the mighty walls of water, it has begun to pour the rain amidst lightening and thundering. The awesome pillar of cloud and fire illuminates the struggling army as their wheels bog down in the mud.

Beginning to panic, they realize that the God of the Israelites is fighting against them. They begin to attempt to turn back. What chaos. What carnage awaits.

### **The Power of God to Destroy (v.26-29)**

<sup>26</sup> Then the LORD said to Moses, "Stretch out your hand over the sea, that the water may come back upon the Egyptians, upon their chariots, and upon their horsemen." <sup>27</sup> So Moses stretched out his hand over the sea, and the sea returned to its normal course when the morning appeared. And as the Egyptians fled into it, the LORD threw the Egyptians into the midst of the sea. <sup>28</sup> The waters returned and covered the chariots and the horsemen; of all the host of Pharaoh that had followed them into the sea, not one of them remained. <sup>29</sup> But the people of Israel walked on dry ground through the sea, the waters being a wall to them on their right hand and on their left.

The people of God stream up out of the Red Sea and onto the eastern bank gathering on the Sinai Peninsula. They are through safely. Looking back along the road through the sea bottom, they can hear and possibly view the Egyptian army laboring in pursuit and now attempting to turn in retreat. The long night and weary journey are over. The morning is dawning. They are safe.

At the command of God, the rod of judgment is stretched out and the enemies of God and His people are destroyed. The massive walls of water collapse upon the Egyptian forces. Pharaoh and all his army are swept under and drowned. In the roiling cataract of millions of tons of water boil back into their proper place under the rising sun of the morning of salvation for God's people and judgment for God's enemies. Not one of God's enemies survived. All perished, every one of them.

The people of God pass through the judgment and are safe. Consider Isaiah 51:10, "Was it not you who dried up the sea, the waters of the great deep, who made a road in the depths of the sea so that the redeemed might cross over?" Yes, it was God. God used the instrumentality of creation in the wind and sea and waves. God used the instrumentality of an obedient leader, Moses who stretched out his rod. God caused the people of God to pass through the waters safe. God caused the heart of Pharaoh to be hardened and all his armies blindly to follow him into judgment and destruction.

Moses labors hard in his writing to be sure that we understand the magnitude of God's powerful doing and delivering. This is no marsh sea or shallow lake of reeds. This is no natural occurrence. These are waters deep and walled up high and a mighty destruction. Either we have a miracle of passing through the Red Sea or the miracle of drowning in six inches of the Reed Sea. Let the doubters give their rational and scientific explanations. When they do, they are undermining our faith by destroying the veracity and integrity of the Word of God.

You see, the original creation was one of the breath of God, the Spirit hovering over the waters of the deep. The new earth and new creation emerge out of judgment of the Genesis flood when the breath of God blew across the face of the earth. The people of God were delivered from the waters of the Red Sea when the wind of God blew opening a path through the sea. And the new birth is by the water of the Word and breath of the Spirit of God. Praise God for the water and



the breath, for the Word and the Spirit. There by the sovereign exercise of the will of God is our salvation actually applied to us.

### **The Power of God to Believe**

**(v.30-31)**

<sup>30</sup> Thus the LORD saved Israel that day from the hand of the Egyptians, and Israel saw the Egyptians dead on the seashore. <sup>31</sup> Israel saw the great power that the LORD used against the Egyptians, so the people feared the LORD, and they believed in the LORD and in his servant Moses.

The display of the power of God causes His people to fear the Lord and to believe in Him and in His ordained leadership. The dead bodies washing up on the shore speak eloquently of the judgment of God. They know their deliverance and salvation is complete. They fear the LORD in His awesome power. They believe in God and in his servant Moses.

Now, how does this come to us? The mighty demonstration of the power of God in our salvation ought to cultivate an awe and fear of God. Yes, we can be intimate with Him as sons. But we also must fear God. Intimacy with God without fear of God becomes presumption.

The people of God are to believe in God and in His ordained leader. Now, we do not as shepherds of God's people stand to you as Moses did to Israel. That is Jesus' place alone. So the application here is not to follow us, the elders of the church. The application here is to believe in Jesus Christ, the one greater than Moses and not to rebel against His sovereign hand.

**Conclusion** Why the title to this message? 1 Corinthians 10:1-2a says, "I want you to know, brothers, that our fathers were all under the cloud, and all passed through the sea, and all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea..." Paul, in the New Covenant, reads the Old Covenant as instructions to us, imperatives for us and illustrations for us (v.6, 11). So we are told that the narrative we just preached is the decisive moment in Israel's history where they were placed into Moses. Their crossing safely through the Red Sea is the outward, external act that represents an internal inward reality. They were under the cloud, passed through the sea and were placed into Moses as a result. How does he know this? He gets this from the closing sentence of Exodus 14. They believed in God and in Moses. In the New Covenant, we believe in God and in Christ. But we do so because we have been placed into Him. Water baptism for us is the outward act that portrays the inward reality. One must have the inward reality in order for the outward act to be valid.

God is in control of the situations of our lives. Sometimes He leads us by round about paths. Sometimes, we are in places that are difficult and hard. But God's good and wise providences have placed us there. It is never out of His control.

The trials of life come to test and expose whether we will truly trust God. Whining, complaining and crying about our situation, even to God in prayer, often is simply another symptom of doubt, disbelief and self-serving self-focused heart agendas. Many of you need to really consider your responses to life situations and see if your praying is from aggravation at God or trust in God.

God has delivered us through judgment. We are not excused from our sin; there is no get out of jail free cards. We are not Lindsey Lohann getting off our crimes by pleading, “no contest” to a lenient judge. Our sin is judged and our penalty is paid. Jesus went through the Red Sea of God’s wrath for us. His great suffering on the cross held back the waves of God’s anger against our sin. We are now free having been placed into Christ in the New Covenant, like Israel was placed into Moses in the Old.

You need not litter the shores of hell with the carcass of your life like the Egyptians did. You can today trust in God and in Christ and be saved. Turn from your sin and all that you have tried and trusted whatever it may be. Believe in the death and resurrection of Christ, bow to Him today. Call on Him to save you. Partake of the living water from the rock for that rock is Christ.