

The Red Sea Crossing

Exodus 13:17-14:31

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In our passage today, we see four key truths about God that Moses intends to communicate to use through this story. Then we will see our proper response to these confidence-producing truths about God.

These four truths about God can be seen as we pay careful attention to the repetition of these truths woven throughout the narrative. The Biblical writers often clue us off to their main point or points by their repetition of words, phrases, and themes. We'll see that with each of these 4 truths, and also with the proper response God calls us to. So, the first truth that we find about God in our text is that God is...

1. Our Ever-present Guide

In the first section of our story, in 13:17-22, we see both at the beginning and toward the end the repetition of God's act of "leading" or "guiding" Israel, using the same Hebrew word in both instances.

13:17 - When Pharaoh let the people go, God did not lead them by way of the land of the Philistines, although that was near..."

13:21 - And the LORD went before them by day in a pillar of cloud to lead them along the way, and by night in a pillar of fire to give them light, that they might travel by day and by night.

There are two ways God guides his people in these verses.

(1) We see God's guidance in leading his people on the specific path of their exit from Egypt. In **verse 17**, we are told:

"...God did not lead them by way of the land of the Philistines, although that was near. For God said, 'Lest the people change their minds when they see war and return to Egypt.'"

The "way of the land of the Philistines" is referring to the highway along the coast that would have taken Israel directly to the land of Canaan. This would have been the shortest way, but God knew Israel was not ready for it, because, if they had gone that route, they would have likely faced the Egyptian military presence in that area. Then, they would have faced the Philistines. Then, they would have had to face all the Canaanites in the land. God knew that if Israel began to face all that fighting, they would quickly turn back to Egypt.

(2) *The second way we see God's guidance is by the manifestation of his presence in the pillar of cloud and fire.* Notice, we are told not that God *sent* a pillar of cloud and fire to lead them. But we are told in **verse 21** that

“the LORD went before them by day in a pillar of cloud to lead them along the way, and by night *in* a pillar of fire to give them light.”

God is present *in* the pillar of cloud and fire. This manifestation of the presence of God is what theologians refer to as a *theophany* - a “God-appearance.” And this pillar of cloud and fire would be an ever-present sign to God's people that God was with them during wilderness sojourning.

Application

So, how are we to understand this truth of God as our ever-present guide today? You might think, “It sure would be nice to have a pillar to stand over the building where God wants me to work, or a pillar for my family to show us which church to become a member of, or a pillar to show me which college I should go to.” But, remember, Israel only had the pillar to guide them for a very short time of their history. It was there through 40 years in the wilderness, then it was gone.

For us today, after the coming of Christ, how are we to understand God as our ever-present guide? As new covenant believers, we too have the ever-present God with us. But more than simply being *with* us, he is now indwelling *in us* through the Holy Spirit, both *corporately* as God's church, and *individually* as God's saved people.

And **Galatians 5:16-25** calls us to “walk by the Spirit,” be “led by the Spirit,” and “keep in step with the Spirit” - all of which deal with the Spirit being our leader and guide. And the Spirit always guides us according to the Spirit-inspired Scriptures.

You may not have a pillar to show you all the specifics of God's will and plans for you, but you have a perfect Word and the ever-present Spirit which will guide you all your journey through this life.

Transition

In the next part of our story, beginning in chapter 14, we see the next truth about God.

2. The Lord Who Works His Sovereign Will

We see God's working out of his sovereign will in two ways here.

(1) God leads Israel to a specific location in order to entice Pharaoh to pursue them.

Look at **14:2-3** where God says to Moses,

“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. For Pharaoh will say of the people of Israel, ‘They are wandering in the land; the wilderness has shut them in.’

God is using Israel as bait to lure Pharaoh out - to his own destruction. God makes it seem as if Israel is lost and incompetent, so that Pharaoh will have another change of mind and go back on his word of letting Israel go. This brings us to the second way in which God works his sovereign will.

(2) God hardens Pharaoh's heart to accomplish his will. In **verses 4 and 17**, God tells Moses that he will “harden Pharaoh's heart,” as God had been doing during the plagues.

The word “harden” has the idea of strengthen. God, in hardening Pharaoh's heart, is not taking a good-hearted man, and making him respond in sinful ways. No, God is using a sinful man, and so working in Pharaoh that Pharaoh remains responsible for his actions and God is sovereignly using Pharaoh to accomplish his will.

For His Glory

In **verse 4** God tells Moses his ultimate purpose in his sovereign directing of events:

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...

The Hebrew word for *glory* is “weighty.” God intends for his people and for the Egyptians to know that he is the most weighty consideration in all the universe. He is the sovereign creator who is infinitely higher and greater than all the gods of Egypt, and infinitely higher and greater than Pharaoh and his army. God intends for Egypt, and ultimately the nations, to see that he is the mighty divine warrior who cannot be conquered.

Israel, because they did not see the full plan of what God was sovereignly orchestrating, reacted with dread when they saw the Egyptians approaching. If they only knew and trusted that God was sovereignly orchestrating his good plans for them, their fears would have been relieved.

Application

Charles Spurgeon once described God's sovereignty as "the pillow upon which the child of God rests his head at night, giving perfect peace."

For some, God's exhaustive and meticulous sovereignty is a hard pill to swallow. But when you embrace it, in time it becomes a soft pillow on which you can rest. And when all around you is shaking, it is that solid rock underneath you that cannot be moved.

Transition

Now, think of the next two truths as a pair that can be summed up in the phrase: "redemptive judgment." God's acts of deliverance in Scripture are often acts of redemptive judgment where God's people are saved and God's enemies are defeated. This is true from the flood, to the Passover, to the cross. The same is true here. So, first, let's look at the *redemptive* aspect of God's redemptive judgment.

3. The Savior from Slavery & Death

We see this in **14:13** and **14:30**.

14:13 - And Moses said to the people, "Fear not, stand firm, and see the salvation of the LORD, which he will work for you today..."

14:30 - Thus the LORD saved Israel that day from the hand of the Egyptians, and Israel saw the Egyptians dead on the seashore.

Through the parting of the waters and the drowning of the Egyptians, God was *unilaterally* saving his people. Israel did nothing to save themselves. There was *nothing* they *could* do. They were trapped, with no way out. Moses said to Israel in response to their fear, "see the *salvation of the Lord*, which *he* will work for you today." There is nothing you can do here. This is something God is going to do for you.

And here is what we see of God's unilateral salvation here. It is twofold: (1) salvation from slavery, and (2) salvation from death.

(1) It was also salvation from slavery. When Israel stood safely on the opposite side of the sea, the Egyptians drowned in the sea, they were finally free from their tyrannical slave master. They were now free to serve the Lord.

(2) Israel faced certain death - death on one side in the waters and death on the other side from the Egyptian army. Only God could save them from certain death.

And this great act of salvation in the Old Testament was intended by God to be a shadow, or foretaste, of the greater act of salvation, the greater exodus, that Jesus would accomplish. Remember at the transfiguration of Jesus when Moses and Elijah appeared with him.

Luke 9:30-31 - And behold, two men were talking with him, Moses and Elijah, who appeared in glory and spoke of his *departure*, which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem.

The Greek word for departure is the word “exodus.” As Jesus’ crucifixion in Jerusalem was approaching, he was going to accomplish a far greater exodus. He would save sinners not merely from a cruel tyrant. He would save them from the tyranny of Satan. And he would save us not merely from physical death, he would save us from eternal spiritual death.

And just as it was for Israel, this salvation is not something we do but something Jesus has done for us. It’s not something we *achieve*. It is something we *receive*.

Application

So, how should we respond to Christ as the only Savior from slavery and death?

(1) *Some of you may still need to be saved from slavery and death.* Apart from Christ, you are a slave to your sin and bound for eternity under God’s judgment. You may fight against those thoughts, try to push them down, or drown them out. It’s probably not something you want to hear, but God is loving you today by showing you the truth about yourself and the deliverance he offers through Jesus.

Israel realized that there was nowhere left to look but to look up. I pray you will do that today. There is no other way for you to be saved from the power of Satan, sin, and death than through Jesus. Your good works and your moral performance will not save you. Your church attendance or membership will not save you. *You* can’t save *you*.

But if you place your faith and trust in Christ today, he will save you. If you trust in his death for sinners and his rising from the dead, if you call on him today to save you, he will.

If you'd like to talk with one of our pastors more about that, we'd love to talk with you after the service today. More than anything else, we want you to know the joy and peace that comes knowing that Jesus has freed you from sin and death.

(2) Christian, never forget the nature of your salvation as being based entirely on the finished work of Christ. It's not uncommon for true, regenerated Christians to doubt their salvation. They think, "My faith is so weak. I struggle with doubts. I keep falling back into the same sins. I'm not sure I'm really saved."

But your salvation is not dependent on the strength of your faith but the strength of your Savior. Your salvation is not dependent on your works, good or bad, but on Christ's work, done in your place.

So, struggling, doubting Christian, it's time to take your eyes off of yourself, and look at the Savior. If you spend all your time looking in the mirror for assurance, you'll never have assurance. But if you lift your eyes to Christ, there will be nothing to fear.

Transition

So, at the Red Sea, we see the first part of redemptive judgment - salvation from slavery and death. Now we come to the second part, the judgment of God's enemies.

4. The Slayer of the Sea Dragon

Some of you may be thinking, "Wait, I didn't see anything about a sea dragon in the story. Yes, there's a sea, but where's the dragon?" Is this just my way of trying to be overly creative?

The short answer is, No. I'm just riffing off of the Biblical authors. I'll get to the sea dragon part in just a moment. It's really important to the overall story of the Bible. But first, let's see what our text says about God's decisive defeat of his enemies. Twice, our passage refers to God "fighting" against the Egyptians.

14:14 - The LORD will fight for you, and you have only to be silent."

14:25 - "...Let us flee from before Israel, for the LORD fights for them against the Egyptians."

Just as God unilaterally saved his people, he also unilaterally fought for his people. And by the time the Egyptians came to realize the Lord was fighting for the Israelites against them, it was too late. In **14:28** we read, “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.”

As God fought single-handedly against the Egyptians, he was making known his superior *power* over them. We see his superior power in a double use of the Hebrew word for hand that doesn’t come out in the ESV.

14:30–31 - Thus the LORD saved Israel that day from the hand of the Egyptians, and Israel saw the Egyptians dead on the seashore. Israel saw the great power (hand) that the LORD used against the Egyptians...

Yes, the Egyptians were a powerful army. But there was a greater Power present at the Red Sea that fought against his enemies and for his people.

Slaying of the Sea Serpent

Now, let’s return to this idea of God slaying the sea serpent. Again, this language isn’t some creative imagery I came up with. Later biblical authors describe the destruction of Pharaoh’s army as the slaying of a sea dragon. Sometimes they use the Hebrew word *tannin* (dragon, serpent, sea dragon). Other times they use two ancient names for sea dragons, Rahab or Leviathan. Let’s look at two passages.

Isaiah 51:9–10 - Awake, awake, put on strength, O arm of the LORD; awake, as in days of old, the generations of long ago. Was it not you who cut Rahab in pieces, who pierced the dragon? Was it not you who dried up the sea, the waters of the great deep, who made the depths of the sea a way for the redeemed to pass over?

Psalms 74:12–14 - Yet God my King is from of old, working salvation in the midst of the earth. You divided the sea by your might; you broke the heads of the sea monsters (*tannin*) on the waters. You crushed the heads of Leviathan; you gave him as food for the creatures of the wilderness.

We see throughout Scripture that the enemies of God’s people are often portrayed as serpents, dragons, or sea dragons. The Bible begins in Genesis with Satan in the form of a serpent. The Bible ends in Revelation with Satan described in Revelation 20 as “the dragon, that ancient serpent” being cast into the lake of fire.

And, throughout Scripture, other enemies of God and his people are described in the dragon-like or serpent-like language.

- In **Ezekiel 29:3**, Ezekiel calls the Pharaoh of his day, “the great dragon that lies in the midst of his streams.”
- In **1 Samuel 17**, Goliath is portrayed as a serpent or dragon-like character. He has bronze armor, the Hebrew word for bronze sounding like the word for serpent. And specific note is made of his having “scale armor” (NASB, NIV). I think Goliath is clearly intended to be seen as a dragon or serpent-like foe.
- In **Matthew 23:33**, Jesus calls the scribes and Pharisees, “You serpents, you brood of vipers.”

Throughout Scripture, we see play out what **Genesis 3:15** says, that the offspring of the serpent will be at enmity with the offspring of the woman. But we are also told that one offspring of the woman would one day crush the head of the serpent. The rest of the story of the Bible leads up to this Serpent Crusher. And when he comes on the scene, the enemies of God fear because they know their judgment is coming.

So, at the Red Sea, God’s judgment upon Egypt, the sea dragon, was a glimpse of what Jesus would accomplish in an even greater way through his death on the cross. The cross was not only an act of spiritual salvation for us. It was also an act of spiritual warfare against the devil. **Colossians 2:15** tells us that on the cross, Jesus “disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame, by triumphing over them in him.” Though Satan and demons are still active in our world, as the New Testament makes clear, they have been dealt a decisive blow. Their time is short, and soon they will meet their doom.

Jesus, through his death and resurrection, is freeing millions from their slavery to Satan through the preaching of the gospel. As Jesus says in the Gospels, he has bound and is plundering the strong man, referring to Satan. And though we still face the day-to-day battles with the temptations of Satan and demons, our Savior is fighting for us.

One day, Jesus will cast Satan and demons into the eternal judgment God has prepared for them. Jesus, the serpent crusher, will then forever rid our world of the ancient foe of his people! This is why we can sing with confidence in A Mighty Fortress, “The prince of darkness grim, we tremble not for him; his rage we can endure, for lo, his doom is sure; one little word shall fell him.”

Application

Christian, you may be discouraged or fearful, enduring and seeing Satan's continued attacks.

- Maybe you find yourself returning to the same patterns of sin, addiction, fears, or doubts. You feel attacks that are coming from outside of you, and you feel helpless and hopeless against them.
- Maybe you are seeing what seems to be like the oppression and fierce attack of Satan or demonic influence in your home or in your family.
- Maybe you have fear that comes from looking at our world and seeing Satan's working throughout our world.

Sometimes, it just looks like Satan is winning. And we are filled with fear, failing in faith, and giving up hope. Kind of like Israel at the Red Sea.

My son Soren said this week, during our family devotions, with tears in his eyes, said, "Sometimes I have thoughts that Satan is more powerful than God." Sometimes we can be tempted to think the same thing too.

If that's you, Christian, this is where God calls us to place our hope. One day we will see Jesus take the serpent by the neck and throw him into the fire, and he will never hurt or harm us or our world anymore. That should give you hope and courage. And even now, day to day, as you face the temptations and opposition of Satan, stand firm in the knowledge that God fights for you against your enemy.

Puritan pastor Richard Sibbes put it this way: "The victory lies not with us, but with Christ, who has taken on him both to *conquer for us* and to *conquer in us*. The victory lies neither in our own strength to get it, nor in our enemies' strength to defeat it. If it lay with us, we might justly fear. But Christ will maintain his own government in us and take our part against our corruptions. They are his enemies as well as ours. Let us therefore be 'strong in the Lord, and in the power of his might' (Eph. 6:10). Let us not look so much at who our enemies are as at who our judge and captain is, *nor at what they threaten, but at what he promises. We have more for us than against us*. What coward would not fight when he is sure of victory?"

Christian, keep fighting. The dragon slayer is fighting for you.

Transition

There are several points of application that we've seen so far from the truths of this story. But the main application, I think, comes from the significant difference between Israel's initial response when faced with the Egyptian army, and their totally opposite response after seeing God's great act of salvation.

5. Our Proper Response: Fear & Faith

Before Israel's proper response of fear of God and faith in God, they responded not with fear of God but fear of man.

14:10 - 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.

At one level, I think we can all sympathize with them. If you were in that very same situation, how do you think you would realistically respond? But at another level, after all Israel had seen with the 10 plagues, these mighty signs and wonders of God, did they think God was going to do all that for them and then leave them to be killed at the Red Sea?

What was the cause of their fearful response? It fundamentally came from a lack of faith in God. One writer called their response, "anti-faith" (Eric Watson). Yes, they had seen the greatness of God, but *maybe* it will turn out that Pharaoh is more powerful than God. They had a fear of man, instead of having a fear and awe of God. And this fear of man came from their lack of faith in God.

But as lacking as their faith was, when they saw God split the waters, they had enough faith to cross. **Hebrews 11:29** says, "By faith the people crossed the Red Sea as on dry land, but the Egyptians, when they attempted to do the same, were drowned." Moses may have been one of the few with solid faith in God. But as small as Israel's faith was when they crossed the Red Sea, it was faith nonetheless.

But after the night had passed and the sun was rising on their new life no longer as slaves in Egypt, we are told of a very different response from Israel.

14:31 - 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.

After seeing the great power of God, they were filled with the fear *of the Lord*, a right response of awe in view of the greatness of God. Their anti-faith was replaced with faith (or belief) in the Lord.

Application

The fear of God and faith in God are still essential to the whole life of God's people today. For those of us who are lacking in our fear of God and faith in God, which I think would be all of us, how do we grow in fear of God and faith?

I think one primary way we can grow in our fear of God and faith in God is to recount and recall the great deliverances of God for his people in the past, and know that he is still the same God today. The Lord was their salvation and the Lord is your salvation.

- The God who brought his people into impossible situations and mightily brought them out, is the God who is able to do the same for you.
- The God who defended his people from the attacks of their enemy is able to defend you from the assaults of yours.

If we would only remember the greatness of God that he has shown to his people time and time again in the past, we would be freed more and more of the fears that so often overwhelms us.

This is why you need to put ourselves under the whole counsel of God in his word. Romans 15:4 tells us that, "whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, that through endurance and through the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope."

The grand story of salvation, and all the small and great stories of God's salvation and deliverance, are intended by God to build your faith in him. You need these old stories from the past to renew your faith today.

If God's got *this*, he's got whatever troubles you're facing today or will face tomorrow. With every testing of our faith, we can turn again and again to the God who once said to his people,

"Fear not, stand firm, and see the salvation of the LORD."