

Trusting in God's Faithfulness
September 14, 2008

Do you know what the most important event in the entire Old Testament to the Israelite people is? It is the story of Moses leading his people across the Red Sea, or Sea of Reeds, to safety. Why is it so important? Because the story teaches us that God is active and involved in human history. God saves the Hebrew people, gives Israel its identity, and offers a clear disclosure of who Yahweh is.

Exodus 14:10-14 & 26-31:

As Pharaoh drew near, the Israelites looked back, and there were the Egyptians advancing on them. In great fear the Israelites cried out to the Lord. They said to Moses, "Was it because there were no graves in Egypt that you have taken us away to die in the wilderness? What have you done to us, bringing us out of Egypt? Is this not the very thing we told you in Egypt, 'Let us alone and let us serve the Egyptians'? For it would have been better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die in the wilderness." But Moses said to the people, "Do not be afraid, stand firm, and see the deliverance that the Lord will accomplish for you today; for the Egyptians whom you see today you shall never see again. The Lord will fight for you, and you have only to keep still."

Then the Lord said to Moses, "Stretch out your hand over the sea, so that the water may come back upon the Egyptians, upon their chariots and chariot drivers." So Moses stretched out his hand over the sea, and at dawn the sea returned to its normal depth. As the Egyptians fled before it, the Lord tossed the Egyptians into the sea. The waters returned and covered the chariots and the chariot drivers, the entire army of the Pharaoh that had followed them into the sea; not one of them remained. But the Israelites walked on dry ground through the sea, the waters forming a wall for them on their right and on their left.

Thus the Lord saved Israel that day from the Egyptians; and Israel saw the Egyptians dead on the seashore. Israel saw the great work that the Lord did against the Egyptians. So the people feared the Lord and believed in the Lord and in his servant Moses.

One: This is the Word of the Lord. **ALL: Thanks be to God.**

Exodus is a book of highs and lows: Moses' mother, Miriam, and Pharaoh's daughter save the baby Moses' life, only to have him run away from home in shame because he murders an Egyptian man. Moses meets God at the burning bush and God teaches him his purpose in life, but then the stuttering Moses has to face the intimidating and unyielding Pharaoh. Yahweh defends the Israelites and works through Moses to achieve freedom, only to have them pursued by the Egyptian army.

When today's story begins, the Hebrew people are afraid. Pharaoh has changed his mind about letting the Israelites go and decided that he had a pretty nice set up when he had the Israelites working as slave labor. Even though Pharaoh promised them freedom, he sends out his best soldiers after them, including over six hundred chariots.

With hindsight, it is easy to pick on the Hebrew people. We already know the end of the story: God will eventually deliver them, so we may be tempted to judge them for their lack of faith. Let's try to put ourselves in their shoes for a minute. They have left their homes, taken only what they can carry on their backs, and left everything else behind to follow God, who is showing them where to go by following a pillar of cloud. All they have ever known is life in Egypt: now they fear their unknown future. As slaves, they knew what to expect, even if they were treated inhumanely. Some people today do not leave abusive relationships because, even though they know they are not being treated with dignity, they fear the unpredictable alternative.

The Hebrew people take that bold step of faith and follow Moses, but now have buyer's remorse. Have you ever seen some new toy, item of clothing, or gadget that you just thought you had to have and bought on impulse? The problem is, when you get home, you start to wonder what in the world you were thinking. The Israelites have regrets as they ask themselves, "What have we done?" They wish they could hit the rewind button and take it all back as they see the Egyptian army approaching. They know they are no match for the Egyptians' advanced weaponry. The problem is there is a charging army behind them and a body of water in front of them. There seems to be no way out.

Dripping with sarcasm, the Israelites ask Moses, "Was it because there were no graves in Egypt that you have taken us away to die in the wilderness?" Moses calmly replies that they do not need to be afraid because the Lord will fight for them. All they have to do is keep still.

Keeping still is so hard: when facing a big problem, we want to act. We feel out of control, so doing something, doing anything, makes us feel better, even when it is better to remain calm and composed. Sometimes by overreacting, we can make the problem even worse.

I admit it: I am not patient. When I envision a change that can make things better, I want it and I want it now. When I see friends or church members in pain, I want to be able to wipe away their tears and help them feel better right away. I am reminded of a conversation Phillips Brooks, the nineteenth century Episcopal priest, had with a friend. Brooks was feverishly pacing, clearly agitated, so his friend asked him what was wrong. "The trouble is, I'm in a hurry, but God isn't." Haven't we felt that way many times: I know that I have!

Eugene Peterson writes, "The person who looks for quick results in seed planting of well-doing will be disappointed. If I want potatoes for dinner tomorrow, it will do me little good to plant them in my garden tonight. There are long stretches of darkness and invisibility and silence that separate planting and reaping."

When I am tempted to think that God's plans are taking a while to unfold, I turn to the pages of Exodus. In this book, it takes forty years for God's chosen people to reach the holy land. Forty years! They spend forty years without a home: many of the people who leave Egypt die before they are able to live a settled life again. We wish that wilderness was not a part of life, but unfortunately it is. Those who have been dealing

with Hurricane Ike and its aftermath are experiencing the wilderness. Those who have heard a worrisome diagnosis know what it is like to live in the wilderness.

In that wilderness, we are tested. There are times we feel lonely or abandoned. There are times we may question our purpose or what God has in store for us. In the wilderness, we may wish to be able to undo what has happened, but God is calling us beyond our regrets into a new future. As long as the Israelites look back at the Egyptians, their fear will paralyze them. Instead if they can let go of their past and look ahead, they will observe the exciting things God has in store for them.

God helps the Hebrew people move forward by placing the pillar of cloud between them and the Egyptian army. That cloud keeps them from looking behind and turns their attention toward what is ahead. That cloud is similar to a good friend who helps give us the courage to face our fears or gives us a swift kick in the pants when we are tempted to get stuck feeling sorry for our predicament.

Then God, through Moses, parts the Red Sea, or the Sea of Reeds. Do you believe that God has the power to deliver us when there seems to be no way out? I do. I believe that God parted the waters and gave them safe passage. This story shows us that Israel's salvation had nothing to do with them: their own abilities, strength, and ingenuity could not save them. The Hebrew people said it themselves: if it had been up to them, the Israelites would have maintained the status quo and stayed in slavery.¹ The miracle does not occur because of Israel's cleverness or because they "deserved" to be saved, but simply because God fights for justice and mercy. Deuteronomy 7:8 explains that the Israelites are delivered from bondage because God loves them.

God saves them from two enemies: from the Egyptian armies and from their own fear and doubt. I said earlier that Exodus is a book of highs and lows: passing through the Red Sea is one of the mountaintop experiences of faith. As the Hebrew people evade capture, they have the eyes of faith to be able to recognize that it was God who saved them. When they face other challenges, they know that God can be trusted because the Lord delivered them from the Egyptians. When we are in the wilderness ourselves, we can have courage to face our fears by recalling our own mountaintop experiences and those times God has been there for us in past.

Just because the Hebrew people overcome this challenge does not mean they are in the clear. Other obstacles continue to test their faith. In chapter 16, the Israelites do not have any food: they are terrified of starving to death when God provides manna for them to eat. Then in chapter 17, the Hebrew people are dying of thirst: they have nothing to drink. God gives them water to survive in their desperate hour. So when we get through one trial, that does not mean we are finished. But we have the confidence that the God who saw us through our past trials will also deliver us in the future.

Gladys Aylward, a missionary to China in the 1940s, was forced to flee when the Japanese invaded, but she could not leave behind the children entrusted to her care. With only one assistant, Gladys led more than a hundred orphans over the mountains to safety. During Gladys' journey out of the war-torn land, she grappled with despair as

¹ Exodus 14:12.

never before. After passing a sleepless night, she faced the morning with no hope of reaching safety. A thirteen-year-old girl in her group reminded Gladys of their much-loved story of Moses and the Israelites crossing the Red Sea. "But I am not Moses," Gladys cried in desperation. "Of course you aren't," the girl replied, "but Yahweh is still God!" When Gladys and her orphans made it through, they proved once again that no matter how inadequate we feel, God is still God and we can trust our Lord to deliver us.²

There are times that we, like Gladys and the Israelites, are afraid. The obstacles seem daunting; hope seems elusive. We discover in their experiences a living God who is fighting for us. At times, all we have to do is be still. Even though Yahweh's plan seems like it can take a while to come to fruition, I believe that it all works out in the end. God is in control. When we are on the mountaintop and overcome with joy, God is trustworthy and faithful. When we are unsure of where to turn, God is trustworthy and faithful. When we are in the wilderness, God is trustworthy and faithful. Thanks be to the Lord for God's faithfulness, that is reliable no matter what life brings our way. Amen.

² Ray Besson and Ranelda Mack Hunsicker tell this story in their book [The Hidden Price of Greatness](#), which is retold in [1001 Quotes, Illustrations, and Humorous Stories](#).