



Praise, Prayer & Preaching sermon

Studies in Exodus: Watching the rear flank

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Exodus 14:19-31

19 Then the angel of God, who had been traveling in front of Israel's army, withdrew and went behind them. The pillar of cloud also moved from in front and stood behind them, **20** coming between the armies of Egypt and Israel. Throughout the night the cloud brought darkness to the one side and light to the other side; so neither went near the other all night long. **21** Then Moses stretched out his hand over the sea, and all that night the LORD drove the sea back with a strong east wind and turned it into dry land. The waters were divided, **22** and the Israelites went through the sea on dry ground, with a wall of water on their right and on their left. **23** The Egyptians pursued them, and all Pharaoh's horses and chariots and horsemen followed them into the sea. **24** During the last watch of the night the LORD looked down from the pillar of fire and cloud at the Egyptian army and threw it into confusion. **25** He jammed the wheels of their chariots so that they had difficulty driving. And the Egyptians said, "Let's get away from the Israelites! The LORD is fighting for them against Egypt." **26** Then the LORD said to Moses, "Stretch out your hand over the sea so that the waters may flow back over the Egyptians and their chariots and horsemen." **27** Moses stretched out his hand over the sea, and at daybreak the sea went back to its place. The Egyptians were fleeing toward it, and the LORD swept them into the sea. **28** The water flowed back and covered the chariots and horsemen--the entire army of Pharaoh that had followed the Israelites into the sea. Not one of them survived. **29** But the Israelites went through the sea on dry ground, with a wall of water on their right and on their left. **30** That day the LORD saved Israel from the hands of the Egyptians, and Israel saw the Egyptians lying dead on the shore. **31** And when the Israelites saw the great power the LORD displayed against the Egyptians, the people feared the LORD and put their trust in him and in Moses his servant.

In Exodus 14, we read of the Lord's guidance and protection of his people during the most challenging of times. We have been introduced to the way in which God guided his people: *"By day the Lord went ahead of them in a pillar of cloud to guide them on their way and by night in a pillar of fire to give them light, so that they could travel by day or night."* (13:21)

In the fourteenth chapter, the pillar which normally went ahead of the people to lead them, moved to the rear of the community on the march to assist them. It becomes an obscuring cloud, a kind of buffer between them and the approaching army of Pharaoh.

The crossing of the Red Sea is one of the most decisive accounts which helped to shape the life of the people of Israel. Our Bible records that the protection of God was important to them, as a huge number of people crossed to the other side. This tells us a great deal about the nature of God, who will be with his people in every age, when they feel they have no place to which they can flee and when what might be described as an enemy is behind them and too close for any kind of comfort.

The broader passage is not without its challenges, especially in relation to the outcome for the Egyptians. But we must understand it in its context and seek to ask what it has to say to us. Nothing in Israel's history provides more remarkable evidence of God's actions on behalf of his people in their time of need.

It is worth considering the difficulty that such a passage as this raises in the minds of many people. One writer coined the description in terms of "the brutality of the story". What is the nature of the difficulty?

- The Israelite victory at the expense of the Egyptians has long been problematic
- The nature of God and human suffering is hard to reconcile—with the inclusive nature of God and the end of the Egyptians
- The danger of modern hearers of these words interpreting it as licence to call down judgement and the consequent actions upon those they deem to be their enemies

There are no easy answers, but it is interesting that it is not just the twenty-first century scholars who struggle with this issue, for in Deuteronomy 28 an early debate exists. The fact that the Exodus account is invariably linked to Easter is helpful, because we read the words in a context that understands the heart of God who gave his own Son alongside his people in their suffering.

Even one of the most unlikely of scholars, who would normally look for natural allusions to explain events, is hesitant on the crossing of the sea. Martin Noth, a German scholar of the Hebrew scriptures, wrote in his Exodus Commentary: "It is extremely questionable whether it is appropriate to look for a natural parallel for the events."

We remind ourselves that the account tells us how water disappeared from the centre of the sea to enable people to cross and the same water reappeared in order that God's judgement might come upon Pharaoh.

It is an example of how, in the face of incredible desperation, God acted deliberately to assist his people.

I want to offer three perspectives on how these events might say something to us today and draw upon the truth that God is always at our rear flank if we are ready to acknowledge him. My perspectives could be described as practical lessons in the life of faith—for whilst we may not be confronted by an army behind us, as Christian people we certainly need to be acquainted with the care and support of God in our difficult times.

NO-ONE ESCAPES FACING DIFFICULT CIRCUMSTANCES

How this perspective plays out will be different for every one of us. It may happen:

- In personal challenges within our family or work
- In clear opposition to the values we hold dear
- In trying circumstances that we have to bear

None of us can escape having to face challenges, but all of us can know the presence of God at our rear flank.

Within earshot of my words this evening are so many people who know from experience that no-one is going to journey through life in a way that is totally free from pain, sorrow and the 'Red Seas' of challenge.

The story of the deliverance of the Hebrews from slavery in Egypt could be said to set the pattern of God's relationship with his people. This becomes the message of a liberated people whose task is to set the world free and, most significant of all, to experience for themselves the freedom which God offers.

This pattern is seen most powerfully in the redeeming work of God in Jesus Christ both in the cross and the resurrection.

The journey to freedom, as it is told in Exodus, begins in the Passover narrative (12:37-39), as God calls his people to move on. Pharaoh makes one last attempt to block their departure. It would be a mistake to simply see everything turning on the remarkable events of the Red Sea—for it is the role of Moses and his call for the people not to be afraid which is also vitally important.

In his commentary, Walter Brueggemann wrote, "Moses had provided a revolutionary alternative for the slaves, an alternative to the demands of Egypt. In prospect, such emancipation had been attractive. In hand, however, it is only a profound hardship. It is difficult to sustain a revolution, because one loses all the benefits of the old system, well before there are any tangible benefits from what is promised."

Moses' response to the challenge is one that is a characteristic oracle of salvation and one we can clearly understand through gospel eyes.

"Do not be afraid. Stand firm and you will see the deliverance the Lord will bring you today. The Egyptians you see today you will never see again. The Lord will fight for you; you need only to be still." (14:13-14)

How does this speak into the challenges of our own lives?

We are called to stand firm in the midst of the difficulty. This may be the last thing in the world that we feel we ought to do—for we have been falsely led to believe that the way out of any situation involves frenetic activity. Maxie Dunnam commented, "One of our problems is that we want to act too quickly. When we're in a fix, we look frantically for the nearest escape. Many times we act foolishly, doing things we shouldn't do, taking advice we shouldn't take, spending our energy in futile efforts. We need to stand still, to wait awhile."

It is one of the most difficult calls in our lives—to stand still. But the reason why we stand still is because we learn that Moses was right in refusing to give in to fear and, consequently, become incapacitated. In such a situation, our frantic activity will actually do the exact opposite from what we expect—it freezes us in our dilemma. Our standing still can give us a wider perspective and helps us to comprehend the problem in a far healthier way.

Kathleen Bostrom offers helpful pastoral reflections on this passage. She writes, "A widow invites a friend to dinner, not as a way of replacing her husband's memory, but as a way of reclaiming the goodness of life that is still hers to live. A student, denied a place in the university of her dreams, discovers that there is more than one place where she can follow her heart. The unfaithful spouse chooses to put his energy back into his marriage, and the wronged spouse chooses forgiveness as the only way to heal the wounds of a past we cannot change." She suggests these are examples of the Exodus message and the underlying yet grand theme of scripture that God delivers and opens up new doors for his people.

THESE ARE THE VULNERABLE MOMENTS OF OUR LIVES

Bishop Gerald Kennedy concluded his autobiography *While I'm On My Feet* with an interesting observation, "... we can assume only two positions in the presence of God. One is on our knees, saying, 'God, be merciful to me a sinner!'; the other is on our feet, saying, 'Here am I! Send me.'"

This provides an excellent picture of the Christian life. Two positions in response to God's call—and both have a positive relationship with the other.

We can only begin to imagine the bewilderment that faced the Israelites at the edge of the Red Sea. The sea stretched out before them, mountain ranges on either side and an army close behind. They could easily become disillusioned by what might lie ahead.

In our moments of vulnerability and when we fear there is no way out of our situation, we can still be aware of the presence of God. We continue to be pilgrims on a journey and God's journey to freedom always passes through difficult terrain.

We may consider our own situations and see a way forward with God's presence. In these times, we must refuse the accusatory ways of negativism. We must deny the inner-temptation to see no way forward. We are invited to see the truth that God is both ahead of us and behind us at our rear flank.

We often prove this reality as we embrace what it is to be forgiven by God and then to allow ourselves to be agents of God's forgiveness in our own lives. Clara Barton, the founder of the Red Cross, was reminded one day by a friend of an especially cruel remark that someone had made to her years before. When Clara didn't seem to respond, the friend queried, "But don't you remember?" Barton's reply was striking, "No, I distinctly remember forgetting it."

In vulnerable periods in our lives, we can become captive to a lesser narrative than grace, but if we embrace God's presence, both before us and behind us, we will be part of his saving work.

YET WE MAY DISCOVER A WAY OF SALVATION

The thought of 'Salvation' is bound up with the entire story of Israel and God's saving work with her as a people. All the institutions, religious rites and thought-forms of the nation originate in God's saving activity.

The link between the Old and New Testaments is vitally connected and nowhere more clearly enunciated than by Prof. James Atkinson, who wrote, "And the end of the whole story (and the beginning of our own) was that, when he came himself, his name was Jesus, and his mission was to save his people from their sins (Matthew 1:21)."

The main theme of the gospels is the action we see in Jesus Christ, sent by God to his people. Howard Marshall writes, "That action is celebrated in traditional language as the redemption or deliverance of Israel from its enemies."

The work of salvation can be read against the background of the larger biblical story, or in the specific circumstances of our own experience—perhaps most helpfully against both. The total biblical message of salvation may be succinctly described as God's answer at an immediate point of human need.

One of the great lessons that Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn discovered in the Soviet gulag was as he worked in the fields. His days were monotonous and followed a pattern of back-breaking labour and slow starvation. The hopelessness became almost too much to bear.

Solzhenitsyn felt no purpose in continuing his fight, concluding that his life would make no ultimate difference. He laid down his shovel and a guard ordered him up. He knew the consequences of not responding would be that he would be bludgeoned to death. He had seen it happen many times.

He wrote of how he felt a presence in an old man sitting next to him. The man drew on the floor with a stick at his feet. He traced the sign of the cross. It shifted the whole of Solzhenitsyn's perspective.

Charles Colson described it in this way, "Yet in that moment, he knew that the hope of all mankind was represented by that simple cross—and through its power, anything was possible. Solzhenitsyn slowly got up, picked up his shovel, and went back to work—not knowing that his writings on truth and freedom would one day inflame the whole world."

God can use even the most difficult of circumstances for his good and his perfect will (Romans 8:28).

Throughout time, people have seen the close relationship between Exodus and the Easter narrative for Christians. This is perhaps demonstrated in the struggle between good and evil and the recognition that any victory will always be with God.

It is little wonder that the writer of Exodus concluded the section with the powerful and appropriate words, "*And when the Israelites saw the mighty hand of the Lord displayed against the Egyptians, the people feared the Lord and put their trust in him and in Moses his servant.*" (14:31)

The fear of the people takes on a whole new direction. We see the transformation is clearly articulated in the movement from verse 10 to the end of the chapter. It is perhaps one of the most momentous examples of the change that God brings about in those who trust him—and it produces a convincing demonstration that God has our best interests at heart by being at our rear flank!

This one passage could be considered to be the bedrock of Israel's faith, in a story that moves from:

- Fear to faith
- Slavery to freedom
- Death to life.

It should not surprise us, then, that in many traditions this very passage is read as part of the great Easter vigil.

A number of years ago, one of my congregation members, to whom I had become very close, was dying. As is often the case, it was hard to know when this would happen. The situation was made more difficult for me as a pastor as I was about to leave for my annual holiday, which was on a Spanish island.

During this time of holiday leave, I received a telephone call from his family to say that he was in fact dying and, as I only had four or five days of the holiday left, there was no need to rush back, for Charles had said he would hang on until I arrived home.

Charles was a man of faith and invariably when I made pastoral visits to his home, we would listen to music together. He was a man of words, being a leading lawyer, but it was often in the silence and in listening to music that his most meaningful moments took place.

Charles died within hours of my arriving home and he became, for me, a great example of how God both leads us onwards, but also draws near in protection of our rear flank.

As a person writes their name on the flyleaf of a book or initials a particular valuable, so Jesus Christ stamps his very purpose on our lives. He is at our rear flank!