



**LIVING WORD  
EPISCOPAL CHURCH**

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## The Red Sea

**Exodus 13:17-14:31**

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When I was a teenager we visited Universal Studio. Today there's an amusement park there, but back then it was much simpler. The highlight of the visit was riding the tram that wound its way through the backlot. It drove us through the town square where they were filming the *Back to the Future* sequels. Then it twisted back on itself and took us to the lagoon and another little town that had been built for *Jaws*, but was currently the setting for *Murder, She Wrote*. The tram wound its way around from there until we were back at the lagoon, where it stopped. The tour guide stood up in the front and raised his hands out over the water and commanded them to part in his best Charlton Heston impression. The waters parted and the tram drove through. It wasn't the spot where they had filmed *The Ten Commandments* back in the 50s, but they'd made an attempt at duplicating the special effect from that movie. This was the highlight of the tour—or at least it's clear that's what they'd intended years before when the park opened. By the late 1980s it wasn't very impressive compared to many of the other things they showed us and it didn't help that the tram stopped mid-way through the water so that the mechanical shark from *Jaws* could swim up and attack. But in the early 70s, I'm sure that parting of the waters had been quite the thing to see and the whole tour, as it wound its way through the backlot, was headed towards that Red Sea climax.

Maybe the designers of the tour had read the Bible. As we pick up with verse 17 or Exodus 3, we see that the Lord did something similar with

the Israelite. After the final plague, the death of the firstborn, Pharaoh summoned Moses and commanded the Israelites to get out of Egypt. And so they left. But they didn't make a beeline for Canaan. Here's what the text says:

**When Pharaoh let the people go, 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." But God led the people around by the way of the wilderness toward the Red Sea. And the people of Israel went up out of the land of Egypt equipped for battle.** (Exodus 3:17-18)

The Israelite marched out of Egypt in formation with the warriors in the lead. The fastest route would have been the road along the Mediterranean Sea, but it was fortified by the Egyptians and led straight into Philistine territory. The Israelites weren't ready for that. But, more important, the Lord wasn't finished revealing himself to either the Israelites or the Egyptians.

And where is it that the Lord is leading them? Translators since the Septuagint, the ancient Greek translation of the Old Testament, have translated the Hebrew as "Red Sea", but the Hebrew is actually "Sea of Reeds". What does that mean? Well, later in the Old Testament "Sea of Reeds" is the name used for both the Gulf of Aqaba and the Gulf of Suez. The Red Sea as we call it today, extends northwest from the Indian Ocean and separates Africa from the Arabian Peninsula. Sinai is at the northern end of the Red Sea with the Gulf of Suez on the west and the Gulf of Aqaba on the east. But these are saltwater bodies and reeds don't grow in them. Reeds do grow throughout the marshes and lakes north of the Gulf of Suez, which may have been where the name originated. Again, we really have no way to be certain about these geographical locations in

Exodus. I think the two best options are that the text here is referring to the Gulf of Suez or the Bitter Lakes, which are just north of the Gulf of Suez. The traditional location of Mt. Sinai—another location we can't know with certainty—is opposite these bodies of water in the Sinai Peninsula.

So the Lord leads Israel not straight to Canaan, but into the wilderness and to the sea, but before the story continues, there's a little insertion that might not seem significant at first glance. Look at verse 19:

**Moses took the bones of Joseph with him, for Joseph had made the sons of Israel solemnly swear, saying, "God will surely visit you, and you shall carry up my bones with you from here."**

Before it goes on, the story looks back to Genesis. In fact, the verbiage here is copied straight from Joseph's instructions in Genesis 50. This is a reminder that the Lord isn't rescuing Israel because Israel is somehow deserving of being rescued. The Lord is rescuing Israel in order to make good on the covenant promises he made with Abraham. It's a reminder that all of this—even the enslavement of Israel—is part of a bigger plan and that the Lord is sovereign behind it all.

We're given a few more place names that meant something twenty-five hundred years ago, but that we can only speculate about now, but the key point is that the Lord is leading them as they follow this meandering path.

**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. The pillar of cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night did not depart from before the people.** (Exodus 3:21-22)

The same God who met Moses in the burning bush and sent him back to Egypt to confront Pharaoh now leads

the people. I'd never thought to ask why the Lord manifested himself in a pillar of cloud and a pillar of fire, but the Jewish commentator Umberto Cassuto points out that large caravans were typically led and directed by a smoke signal in the day and a great torch in the night. The Lord manifests himself similarly here, although in a much more impressive way. As we see later, after the Tabernacle is built and the cloud descends into the holy of holies to rest on the ark, the cloud and the fire aren't just the Lord's means of guiding his people. They're emblematic of his presence in the midst of his people and, in a sense, reveal or manifest his glory.

As we begin Chapter 14, the Lord leads the Israelites further down this meandering route into the wilderness until they find themselves camped facing the sea. The Lord explains the reason for all of this to Moses:

**For Pharaoh will say of the people of Israel, 'They are wandering in the land; the wilderness has shut them in.' 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.**" (Exodus 4:3-4)

The Lord isn't finished with Pharaoh. As we'll see, Pharaoh's people report back to him about Israel. They were only supposed to travel three days into the wilderness to worship, but they haven't yet returned. Pharaoh's going to realise that the bit about three days was a ruse. They never planned to come back. But Pharaoh's also going to hear about their meandering route and think that they've lost themselves in the wilderness and, that camped at the edge of the sea, they'll be easy prey for his army. Again, the Lord is setting all of this up. He's luring Pharaoh and his army into a trap. In one final showdown, the Lord will show to his people that he is the Lord of heaven and earth, that he is with

them, and that he is truly their God and that they are truly his people.

We see in verses 5-9 that this is exactly what happens. Pharaoh plays right into the Lord's hands.

**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?" So he made ready his chariot and took his army with him, and took six hundred chosen chariots and all the other chariots of Egypt with officers over all of them. 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. 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.**

At the realization that the Israelites aren't going to return to Egypt, Pharaoh's heart is again hardened. He musters his army. The Egyptians used a hexadecimal numbering system, so "600" is a round number suggesting that he's sent the entire or almost the entire army after the Israelite. The chariots were the pride of Egypt. They were the strength of Pharaoh's army. And they rode out to recapture Israel as they camped by the sea.

Now, the way the story is told, we the audience know that this isn't going to end well for Pharaoh. He should know better, but he still thinks that despite all that the Lord has done to show his might and his power over Egypt, he can just send his crack troops out to recapture Israel. Pharaoh should be afraid, but he's not. On other hand, the Israelite shouldn't be afraid, but they are. Look at verses 10-12:

**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. 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? 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."**

This foreshadows Israel's future relationship with the Lord and sums up much of the journey to the promised land. Despite everything the Lord has done to show, to demonstrate, and to prove his faithfulness, every time the going is difficult, Israel complains or becomes afraid. Now they see the dust of Pharaoh's approaching army and they cry out to the Lord. The same word is used here that was used back at the beginning of Exodus when they cried out to the Lord in their oppression. The whole story of Exodus so far, these last thirteen chapters, is the revelation of how the Lord heard their cry and came to their aid. Again, it's the proof of his faithfulness. But their circumstances overwhelm them. They forget the faithfulness of God in light of the appearance of their immediate circumstances. It's bad. The author of the story isn't at all sympathetic. I think our first reaction is to shake our heads and wonder what's wrong with them. But then, Brothers and Sisters, how often do we allow the appearance of our immediate circumstances to override what we know of the faithfulness of God? How often do we allow our faith to shrivel up to nothing when we're faced with the trials of life? How often do we compromise out of fear? We do it politically. We do it economically. We do it practically. We compromise what we

know is right when it might cost us our job. We compromise what we know is right because it isn't politically expedient. We compromise what we know is right, because it's easier than taking the high road. In amongst all the talk of abortion coming from the States this week, I noted some statistics showing that the abortion rate amongst evangelicals is almost as high as it is outside the Church. How is that possible? It's possible because we compromise when faced with difficult situations—especially in situations where we think we can get away without anyone noticing. We take the easier way out of our problems, rather than walking in faith with the God who has proved his faithfulness to us by doing no less than giving his own son as a sacrifice for our sins. Brothers and Sisters, don't be afraid. Don't compromise. Trust in God and if you doubt, immerse yourself in the Scriptures that you might know his faithfulness. Mediate on the Supper here at his Table that you might know his faithfulness. The God who gave his life for you will not abandon you to your trials.

Moses reassures the people, but we also get a sense of his impatience with them. In verses 13 and 14 he says to them:

**“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. The LORD will fight for you, and you have only to be silent.”**

The Hebrew reveals Moses frustration better than the ESV. Moses isn't saying, “There, there. Don't worry. Just be still and God will take care of you.” This is a rebuke. They're afraid when they have no reason to be afraid. They should be standing firm in faith, but they aren't. “The Lord will fight for you,” Moses says, “Now, shut up!”

The Lord speaks as well, in verses 15-18:

**“Why do you cry to me? Tell the people of Israel to go forward. 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. 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. And the Egyptians shall know that I am the LORD, when I have gotten glory over Pharaoh, his chariots, and his horsemen.”**

In response to Moses rebuking the Israelite's fear, the Lord now acts, telling the people to start moving towards the sea and giving instructions to Moses to raise his staff and divide the waters. The Lord explains exactly what he's going to do and, once again, it's so that the Egyptians will know who is truly Lord of heaven and earth. The Lord will reveal his glory. And in this we get a look ahead to what the Exodus will mean for Israel. In calling, naming, and rescuing Israel, the Lord is making the people his own. As Adam was in the beginning, Israel will be the Lord's representatives, his agents, the bearers of his image in the world. Israel will be called to reveal God's glory in her national life. This is where it begins. And so Moses and the people obeyed. So did the sea. And the Lord, manifest in the cloud and in the fire, moved to the rear of the Israelite's line. The fire lit up the night for the Israelites while the cloud cast darkness over the Egyptians, keeping Israel safe as the Lord opened the sea. Then in verse 21 comes the great act everyone's been waiting for:

**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. 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. The Egyptians pursued and went in after them into the midst of the sea, all Pharaoh's horses, his chariots, and his horsemen. 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, 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.”** (Exodus 14:21-25)

The Lord watched over his people through the night, holding the Egyptians at bay while dividing the waters of the sea. At dawn a dry pathway through the waters appeared and the Israelite began their trek to the far side. As they did so, the Lord released the Egyptians—not only releasing them but somehow throwing them into confusion. They should have known better than to chase the Israelites into the sea, but they do so anyway. Their chariot wheels are quickly bogged down in the mud. And only then do they realise that they've been played by the Lord, that it is he who fights for Israel and he who has orchestrated their destruction.

**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.” 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. 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. 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.** (Exodus 14:26-29)

The Lord led his people through the waters on dry ground. It's a scene that deliberately calls back to creation, the Lord calling forth dry land from the waters—land suitable for human life. And the Lord just as deliberately undoes the sea, removing his restraining hand and allowing it to drown the Egyptians. The Lord orchestrated all of this to occur in broad daylight so that Israel would know once again that he was present with them—and the Egyptians knew too, their last thoughts before they drowned, acknowledging the sovereignty of the Lord.

Now, what happened at the sea? There have been a number of explanations. To some extent, trying to give a naturalistic explanation defeats the purpose. But our drawing a distinction between the natural and the supernatural would have been a totally foreign way of thinking as far as the Israelites were concerned. This is a post-Enlightenment way of thinking about the world and about God. For the Israelites, God's hand was at work everywhere and in everything. He was engaged with and sustaining his Creation in every way. One of the reasons Umberto Cassuto argues for the Bitter Lakes as the location here is that their water levels are known to go up and down with the tide in the nearby Gulf of Suez. One lake, in particular, has a high spot across its middle that is sometime exposed at very low tides as the water recedes down into the sand. Napoleon once crossed and found himself stranded on the other side and having to call for boats when the tide in the Gulf rose. A strong wind, as reported here, could make the phenomenon even more dramatic. And the swirling water and strong currents that come with the rising tide, particularly with a higher than usual tide, could easily sweep away the Egyptian chariots. That's not to say it had to happen this

way or in that precise location, but it's easy to envision, the Lord working through what we might call both natural and supernatural phenomena and providentially timing everything just right.

Regardless of the exact means, the last verses of the chapter remind us of the key point: this was the Lord's doing and it was an act of covenant faithfulness to his people.

**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 that the LORD used against the Egyptians, so the people feared the LORD, and they believed in the LORD and in his servant Moses.** (Exodus 14:30-31)

The people saw the saving hand of the Lord. They stood on the far side of the sea in awe and wonder. And they believed. Brothers and Sisters, we ought to be moved the same way. In the Exodus we see the faithfulness of God to his promise and to his people. That doesn't mean that God is going to lead each of us through our own personal exodus when times are tough or when we face enemies, but it does add to the big picture of the faithfulness of God. And that ought to strengthen our faith in times of trial and when the pressure is on. It's a reminder that God is with us. It's a reminder that he is our God and we are his people.

But our picture of the faithfulness of God doesn't end with Israel's deliverance at the sea. There were still many battles to fight. You and I have known something far, far greater. In the font—despite there being so little water there—the Lord has led us from bondage to sin and death into life—life in his presence, enlivened by his very Spirit living within us, life with an eternal hope. The stories of the Passover and of the Red Sea lead us into Easter, the greatest triumph of all

and the great Exodus to which the first was merely a type and shadow. In his death and resurrection Jesus has broken the chains of sin and death. He has split the waters and this time they remain open for any and all who will follow him in faith, trusting in the Lord's promise of the life of the age to come. I can't help but think of that great Easter hymn attributed to St. John of Damascus:

*Come, ye faithful rise the strain  
Of triumphant gladness;  
God has brought his Israel  
Into joy from sadness;  
Loosed from Pharaoh's bitter yoke  
Jacob's sons and daughter;  
Led them with unmoistened foot  
Through the Red Sea waters.*

*Tis the spring of souls today;  
Christ hath burst his prison,  
And from three days' sleep in death  
As a sun has risen;  
All the winter of our sins,  
Long and dark, is flying  
From his light, to whom we give  
Laud and praise undying.*

Amen.