

Martin White. 8th February 2009. Exodus 13:20-14:31

Crossing the Red Sea

We are preaching through a series looking at the Bible account of how God led His People, the Israelites out of Egypt; where they had been slaves, and into the Land He had promised them.

Especially we are looking at the time that they were in between leaving the one place, and arriving at the other, and were being led by God through the desert.

And the two reasons I believe that this is important are that we can get to know God better by looking at how He related to His People, and this period in Israel's history, I believe, is very relevant to where we are at as a church at the moment, and I believe God wants to speak prophetically to us through this story.

So far we have looked at how the Israelites came to be in Egypt in the first place – that although it happened through a series of dreadful circumstances in Joseph's life, he recognised that actually it was God who sovereignly led him there.

And we have looked at how, at God's Perfect Time, He delivered them through bringing 10 plagues on Egypt, utterly destroying their pride and showing the emptiness of their false gods.

I want to pick up the story as the last of the plagues – the death of the firstborn has happened, and God's judgement has passed over all the Israelites. And finally, Pharaoh has allowed them to leave Egypt.

This comes from Exodus 13:20-14:31

After leaving Succoth they camped at Etham on the edge of the desert. 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. Neither the pillar of cloud by day nor the pillar of fire by night left its place in front of the people.

Charles Swindoll says that this guidance by God was amazing – God was leading them clearly and unmistakably – a massive pillar of cloud through the day, hovering over them, leading them; and a pillar of fire at night, protecting them, guiding them, warming them.

He says it was the equivalent of us praying “Which job should I take?” and seeing a pillar of fire over a certain office; or asking God who you should marry, then meeting a woman with a pillar of fire over her head!

God didn’t leave any doubt which way He was leading; and think how this must have been for the Israelites – having seen God deliver them from the most powerful nation on earth, now God was visibly leading them to the land He had promised them.

This is an important point; just as Joseph knew that God had led him to Egypt, so God clearly led the Israelites out. There is nothing random in this account.

Then the LORD said to Moses, "Tell the Israelites to turn back and encamp near Pi Hahiroth, between Migdol and the sea. They are to encamp by the sea, directly opposite Baal Zephon. Pharaoh will think, 'The Israelites are wandering around the land in confusion, hemmed in by the desert.' And I will harden Pharaoh's heart, and he will pursue them. But I will gain glory for myself through Pharaoh and all his army, and the Egyptians will know that I am the LORD." So the Israelites did this.

So the Israelites follow the Pillar of Cloud away from Egypt, towards freedom...and then the Cloud switches direction – straight back towards the Egyptian army – and worse. Strategically, this is a disaster!

Pi Hahiroth means ‘the mouth of the gorges’ Migdol means ‘watchtower or high hill’ and Baal Zephon literally means ‘Lord of the North’, which was probably a fortified town on the border, named after one of their gods.

And added to this, the impassable desert was to their south, the Red Sea (possibly the “Sea of Reeds”) was to their east – and Pharaoh was leading the heavy armour of the most powerful army on the planet towards them from the west.



Why? So that God would gain glory, and everyone else would know He is the Lord.

But to the Israelites, maybe things weren't looking so clear-cut.

Remember all the people had ever known was life in Egypt as slaves – they had felt what Egyptian oppression was like; they had grown up knowing the Egyptian army's reputation.

And they were watching as the Cloud had changed direction, leading them back towards Egypt – away from freedom, and into a more and more dangerous position – funneled into a gorge – with no way out; blocked on one side by a fortified town; being overlooked by a n Egyptian watchtower; with an impassable desert one way and an impassable sea the other...and the complete heavy armour of the world's superpower getting closer and closer; feeling the ground begin to tremble under the hooves; seeing the sun glinting off the spears and armour.

When the king of Egypt was told that the people had fled, Pharaoh and his officials changed their minds about them and said, "What have we done? We have let the Israelites go and have lost their services!" So he had his chariot made ready and took his army with him. He took six hundred of the best chariots, along with all the other chariots of Egypt, with officers over all of them. The LORD hardened the heart of Pharaoh king of Egypt, so that he pursued the Israelites, who were marching out boldly. The Egyptians--all Pharaoh's horses and chariots, horsemen and troops--pursued the Israelites and overtook them as they camped by the sea near Pi Hahiroth, opposite Baal Zephon.

So the Israelites were completely surrounded...

As Pharaoh approached, the Israelites looked up, and there were the Egyptians, marching after them. They were terrified and cried out to the LORD. They said to Moses, "Was it because there were no graves in Egypt that you brought us to the desert to die? What have you done to us by bringing us out of Egypt? Didn't we say to you in Egypt, 'Leave us alone; let us serve the

Egyptians'? It would have been better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die in the desert!"

This was, you could say, completely understandable reaction – probably within earshot of a vast army, hearing the shouts of the people who had been their slave-masters – voices that would have made them flinch before.

And what was going through their minds wasn't an exaggeration – Pharaoh and his army really was going to kill them without a second thought.

But the problem was that there were two things to look at...and they were choosing to look at the wrong one.

I remember when a group of us went to watch some motor racing a few years ago, and there was a point when an amazing race was happening – and then a Spitfire flew over – and then the Red Arrows flew over! And I didn't know where to look!

When the Israelites looked over there, there were people waiting to kill them; but when they looked up there, there was the Cloud.

Thankfully, for the Israelites, one person – Moses, was looking in the right direction:

Moses answered the people, "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."

Moses was an exceptional man – but I don't think his faith at this point was beyond any of the other Israelites – any of them could have chosen to look up instead of across.

I think that one of the differences was that Moses had been trained by God over the previous years – he had learned something about how God acted when he was in impossible situations; he had faced Pharaoh before.

But more than not having a fear of Pharaoh and his circumstances, I think Moses was looking the other direction – up instead of across, because he loved the Cloud; he loved God's Presence.

...And as Moses stood in faith, God acted:

Then the LORD said to Moses, "Why are you crying out to me? Tell the Israelites to move on. Raise your staff and stretch out your hand over the sea to divide the water so that the Israelites can go through the sea on dry ground. I will harden the hearts of the Egyptians so that they will go in after them. And I will gain glory through Pharaoh and all his army, through his chariots and his horsemen. The Egyptians will know that I am the LORD when I gain glory through Pharaoh, his chariots and his horsemen."

And once Moses had stood in faith, God acted.

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, 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.

Amazingly, they didn't panic or make a dash for it – they waited in this stand-off all night.

And what they were seeing was God at work.

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.

God had dealt with the impossible, impassable problem so well, they weren't even going to get muddy feet!

The waters were divided, and the Israelites went through the sea on dry ground, with a wall of water on their right and on their left.

The Egyptians pursued them, and all Pharaoh's horses and chariots and horsemen followed them into the sea. During the last watch of the night (the time they would have been most vulnerable to attack) the LORD looked down from the pillar of fire and cloud at the Egyptian army and threw it into confusion. He made the wheels of their chariots come off 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."

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."

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. 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.

This is a terrifying display of God's judgement and power.

But the Israelites went through the sea on dry ground, with a wall of water on their right and on their left. That day the LORD saved Israel from the hands of the Egyptians, and Israel saw the Egyptians lying dead on the shore. 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 closing, I want to make a couple of comments about this.

Firstly, God clearly, unmistakably led them (Pillar of Fire & Cloud)

And secondly, God led them to the strategic, worst place on the planet for them to be; they were utterly and completely trapped and beyond any human solution; they weren't just in a bad place – they were completely hopeless...without God helping them.

Their two options were trust God to deliver you – or die

And when they looked at their circumstances, instead of keeping their eyes on God, it was disaster, but as they changed their perspective and looked at the Cloud; God's Presence, hovering over them, actually they were in the safest place they could be.

And as they all saw once the next day had dawned, just like with their ancestor Joseph, God had planned everything for His Glory and their good, and delivered them.

As some people have said, it wasn't enough for God just to get His People out of Egypt; He also needed to get Egypt out of His People.

By the end of this amazing day, His People were in no doubt who was God – and it wasn't the Egyptian ones.

And they knew who they should fear – and it wasn't Pharaoh or any man.

And they knew that there was absolutely nothing – no possible situation that was too difficult for their God.

When Jesus sent out His Disciples, He told them:

I am sending you out like sheep among wolves. (Matthew 10:18 NIV)

Why does God do this?

Simply so we know Him better.

If you're a sheep among wolves, then, if you're smart, you stick very close to your wonderful, Good Shepherd!

For us in the Crown, as God is moving us on and forming us, I think we need to be ready for God to lead us into some difficult situations – times when the way ahead seems barred – in order that we can know He is the Deliverer; the Provider; our Good Shepherd; Our Strong Tower.

And it's a lesson that many of us are facing at the moment; redundancy; financial hard times; delay; disappointment; times of waiting without knowing the way ahead.

I think the way through is for us not just to stop fearing all the giants around us;

Let's be a people that love the Cloud and stay close to our Shepherd.

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