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Exodus 13:17–14:7

¹⁷ When Pharaoh finally let the people go, God did not lead them along the main road that runs through Philistine territory, even though that was the shortest route to the Promised Land. God said, “If the people are faced with a battle, they might change their minds and return to Egypt.” ¹⁸ So God led them in a roundabout way through the wilderness toward the Red Sea. Thus the Israelites left Egypt like an army ready for battle.

¹⁹ Moses took the bones of Joseph with him, for Joseph had made the sons of Israel swear to do this. He said, “God will certainly come to help you. When he does, you must take my bones with you from this place.”

²⁰ The Israelites left Succoth and camped at Etham on the edge of the wilderness. ²¹ The LORD went ahead of them. He guided them during the day with a pillar of cloud, and he provided light at night with a pillar of fire. This allowed them to travel by day or by night. ²² And the LORD did not remove the pillar of cloud or pillar of fire from its place in front of the people.

Chapter 14

Then the LORD gave these instructions to Moses: ² “Order the Israelites to turn back and camp by Pi-hahiroth between Migdol and the sea. Camp there along the shore, across from Baal-zephon. ³ Then Pharaoh will think, ‘The Israelites are confused. They are trapped in the wilderness!’ ⁴ And once again I will harden Pharaoh’s heart, and he will chase after you. I have planned this in order to display my glory through Pharaoh and his whole army. After this the Egyptians will know that I am the LORD!” So the Israelites camped there as they were told.

⁵ When word reached the king of Egypt that the Israelites had fled, Pharaoh and his officials changed their minds. “What have we done, letting all those Israelite slaves get away?” they asked. ⁶ So Pharaoh harnessed his chariot and called up his troops. ⁷ He took with him 600 of Egypt’s best chariots, along with the rest of the chariots of Egypt, each with its commander.

Red Sea moments.

Let's look at a critical event in the story of Exodus. Moses has demanded that the Pharaoh let the Chosen People go – and the Pharaoh relents. Notice the language: *God did not lead them along the main road that runs through Philistine territory, even though that was the shortest route to the Promised Land. God said, "If the people are faced with a battle, they might change their minds and return to Egypt."*¹⁸ So God led them in a roundabout way through the wilderness toward the Red Sea. Thus, the Israelites left Egypt like an army ready for battle. God made the decision that they would not take the obvious and shortest route from Egypt to the Promised Land. This route runs along the coast into Canaan, but there were several Egyptian fortresses along the way. So, God sends them through the wilderness toward the Red Sea. Interestingly, if you look at the original Hebrew manuscripts of Exodus, the words that have been translated as "Red Sea", *yam suph*, probably means "sea of reeds", and so we cannot be sure that the authors of Exodus are literally referring to the Red Sea. No one knows where this "sea of reeds", if it is not the Red Sea, might be. Some have suggested that it might refer to a swampy area that used to exist where the Suez Canal has been cut. But we will use the traditional translation, and that is Red Sea. We are told that Moses takes the mummified remains of Joseph along with them: this is a

symbolic connection with their past, confirming that God's promises made to the ancient Patriarchs of the Chosen People are still valid. God will protect them along the way, and in fact, we are told that ²¹ *The LORD went ahead of them. He guided them during the day with a pillar of cloud, and he provided light at night with a pillar of fire. This allowed them to travel by day or by night.*

Exodus says that their path takes them through or near *Pi-hahiroth, Migdol, and Baal-zephon*. We are not sure where these places were. Next, God declares: *I have planned this in order to display my glory through Pharaoh and his whole army. After this the Egyptians will know that I am the LORD!*" The route that God has chosen for the Chosen People is not only indirect. It has been selected to encourage the Egyptians to chase and trap the Chosen People, so that the Egyptians and the Israelites will learn the power of God. The Pharaoh goes for the chase, thinking that the Israelites will be trapped when they hit the Red Sea: ⁵ *When word reached the king of Egypt that the Israelites had fled, Pharaoh and his officials changed their minds. "What have we done, letting all those Israelite slaves get away?" they asked.* ⁶ *So Pharaoh harnessed his chariot and called up his troops.* ⁷ *He took with him 600 of Egypt's best chariots, along with the rest of the chariots of Egypt, each with its commander.* God has led the Israelites into a deadly position, but he has done so because he has something special in mind.

No one knows the precise location where the Israelites crossed the Red Sea. It is vaguely Y-shaped, with the bulk of the Red Sea forming the vertical part of the Y. There are two small pieces that form the V shape at the top of the Y. Many believe that they crossed the righthand side of the V, a narrow body of water that emerges northeast from the lower portion of the Red Sea. But there is no consensus on where they crossed. Here is the point, though: God led them into a trap. The Egyptian military has them wedged up against the Red Sea. This is what happens next: ¹⁰ *As Pharaoh approached, the people of Israel looked up and panicked when they saw the Egyptians overtaking them. They cried out to the LORD,* ¹¹ *and they said to Moses, “Why did you bring us out here to die in the wilderness? Weren’t there enough graves for us in Egypt? What have you done to us? Why did you make us leave Egypt? Didn’t we tell you this would happen while we were still in Egypt? We said, ‘Leave us alone! Let us be slaves to the Egyptians. It’s better to be a slave in Egypt than a corpse in the wilderness!’ ”* ¹³ *But Moses told the people, “Don’t be afraid. Just stand still and watch the LORD rescue you today. The Egyptians you see today will never be seen again.* ¹⁴ *The LORD himself will fight for you. Just stay calm.”* They haven’t gotten very far, and they have no way to escape. The people conclude that they would be better off

returning to Egypt to be slaves than to die in the middle of nowhere. But Moses knows that God led them there. Moses knows that God will not abandon them.

We all know how it ends. God says this to Moses: *“Why are you crying out to me? Tell the people to get moving! ¹⁶ Pick up your staff and raise your hand over the sea. Divide the water so the Israelites can walk through the middle of the sea on dry ground.”* Then the wind blew all that night, turning the seabed into dry land. ²² So the people of Israel walked through the middle of the sea on dry ground, with walls of water on each side! ²³ Then the Egyptians—all of Pharaoh’s horses, chariots, and charioteers—chased them into the middle of the sea. ²⁴ But just before dawn the LORD looked down on the Egyptian army from the pillar of fire and cloud, and he threw their forces into total confusion. The Egyptians tried to escape, but the LORD swept them into the sea. ²⁸ Then the waters returned and covered all the chariots and charioteers—the entire army of Pharaoh. Of all the Egyptians who had chased the Israelites into the sea, not a single one survived.

Exodus 13:17-18 summarizes the deliberate fashion with which God trapped his people: ¹⁷ When Pharaoh finally let the people go, God did not lead them along the main road that runs through Philistine territory, even though that was the shortest route to the Promised Land. God said, *“If the people are faced with a battle, they might change their minds and return to Egypt.”* ¹⁸ So God led them in a

roundabout way through the wilderness toward the Red Sea. God chose an indirect route and let them get trapped, so that God could reassure them of his eternal presence and faithfulness by solving the problem in a miraculous way.

Christians call a situation like this a “Red Sea moment”. It’s when we are in a seemingly impossible situation. God does not promise to make our problems go away. But God does promise to lead us through them. Right now, there is chaos going on in the United States and in the world. We have shootings, rising crime, violent demonstrations, and a nation divided like it never has been before. It seems to have come out of nowhere, as if it were born from the pandemic. We have droughts, very serious ones, in the southwest. Tornados, floods, and fires, all seem to be increasing in magnitude every year. Not to mention the pandemic. There is a war going on in Ukraine that is threatening to go nuclear. There are famines in Africa, and many millions of people on the move throughout the world, escaping poverty and corrupt governments. The Christian Church, at least the denominational church, is dissolving. There was a generation born in the wake of the 60’s that didn’t want to have anything to do with the church – and it caused a link in the chain to be broken. There have been revivals in the past, and we know that we desperately need one now. Otherwise, it appears that our culture is destined to be one that promotes only the things of this world, not the things of

God's world. The rising hatred, violence, and division are signs of a nation that has forgotten that we are indeed made in the image of a peaceful and loving God.

For some of us, our own personal situations seem to dwarf what is going on in the nation and the world. We might have health challenges of our own, or we might be caring for a very sick loved one. We might be facing financial problems, marriage conflicts, or the loss of employment. Our own church is in delicate condition, and a place that has provided a spiritual home for over a century might close. In both our personal lives and in the world around us, it appears that we are on the run, desperately trying to escape what is happening to us. There is a mighty, evil army at our heels. And for some crazy reason, God has led us to a dead end. We do not see a way out.

We are having one hell of a Red Sea moment. In Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, he writes: *I don't want you to forget, dear brothers and sisters, about our ancestors in the wilderness long ago. All of them were guided by a cloud that moved ahead of them, and all of them walked through the sea on dry ground.*

Paul is encouraging those in Corinth who are having doubts about their faith and their futures. Paul isn't talking to Jews who are followers of Christ. He is talking to Gentiles who are new believers. He is handing off the mantle of the Chosen People to the followers of Christ, giving them their biblical inheritance. He is

telling them that they have the same protection that the Chosen People had when they found themselves stuck at a dead-end with a mighty army behind them. But he is also telling them that they will have their Red Sea moments. In the New Testament, the crossing of the Red Sea represents God's way of dealing with problems. His thinking is bigger than ours. He sees paths that we do not see. He will literally lead us to the banks of the Red Sea so that he can part the waters and prove once again that we are secure, that we will get through whatever is happening - as long as we take our directions from God and not from the world around us. We must go forward in life, not backward, despite the terrible odds. God becomes real to us when we are up against the Sea with an army at our backs. We must let God guide us through disappointment, sadness, and anxiety – so that we can find our true destiny under God. We often do not find it until we have had a huge Red Sea moment. It's often at the end of a Red Sea moment when we most strongly feel the presence of God within us.

Many of us are facing Red Sea moments, and these moments can drag on for days or months or years, and so perhaps they should be called Red Sea events. As a nation and as a global civilization, we are all sharing in a major Red Sea event. We have become very concerned with ecology, with climate change, with deforestation, and in general, with returning the Earth to its natural state before

humans began mucking up the planet. But there is another sort of ecology, a spiritual one. People in biblical times were much closer to God. As inheritors of the faith, of the New Covenant, and of the command by God to maintain the faith, we have a lot of work to do. We need to restore the People of God to the state we were in before we became so commercialized, and before we became so focused on envying the lives of celebrities instead of mimicking the life of Christ. This task is just as intractable as the task of restoring the air, oceans, forests, and rivers to the state they were in when Jesus walked this Earth. Spiritual ecology is more important than physical ecology. And we need to start with ourselves. Then we must remember the Great Commission from the Gospel of Matthew, where Jesus commanded: *“All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. ¹⁹ Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰ teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”* We need to recover that natural state, where the People of God have God in their hearts and minds every second of every day. Please pray briefly with me.

God, guide us through our Red Sea moments, no matter how long they last. Help us use these times to rediscover your power and your grace. Help us restore your kingdom on Earth. Amen.