

Sermon 44, God Gets Glory over Pharaoh, Exodus 14

Proposition: God split the sea and led His people out of Egypt in order to teach Egypt that He is Yahweh — a lesson that His people need to learn, and that we show we have learned when we believe Him and His written word.

- I. Yahweh Leads into Danger, vv. 1-3
- II. Yahweh Announces His Plan, vv. 4-9
 - A. The Plan, v. 4
 1. God Will Get Glory over Pharaoh, v. 4a
 2. God Will Teach Pharaoh Who Yahweh Is, v. 4b
 - B. The Preparations, vv. 5-9
- III. Yahweh's People Denounce Him, vv. 11-12
- IV. Yahweh Saves His People, vv. 13-30
 - A. He Describes What He Will Do, vv. 13-18
 - B. He Positions Himself as Israel's Shield, vv. 19-20
 - C. He Keeps His Promise to Split the Sea, vv. 21-30
- V. The Lessons of God's Deliverance, v. 31
 - A. He Is Yahweh
 - B. Believe Him
 - C. Believe Moses

Introduction

Dearly beloved congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ, we have seen the original sign of Aaron's rod becoming a serpent and swallowing up Pharaoh's magicians' rods. We have seen the ten plagues. We have seen the Passover ritual that commemorates the final plague and thus the truth that only through the death of the firstborn can God's people live or hope to live. And now we will see how God dealt with Egypt and kept them quiet for the next four hundred years. He hurled the hosts of Egypt into the Red Sea, thus teaching them that He is Yahweh — and, we might add, that they are not. God's people responded to this further revelation of His character by believing Him and His servant Moses. And you and I are called to do the same.

I. Yahweh Leads into Danger, vv. 1-3

Now, the first thing I want you to see in this text, behind all the complicated geographical language that refers to three different places, is the reality that God is telling Israel to go back into an area of Egyptian control. They were headed out and had already reached a zone where Egypt's ability to catch them was rapidly fading. And so God told them to turn around and go back. Head back toward bondage. Go to an area that's firmly Egypt-controlled.

We don't know where this area was. We simply haven't a clue where any of these cities were. A lot of people have tried to figure it out, and they have all come up with different ideas. It is likely that the sea level was much higher in those days than it is today, that the Gulf of Suez

came further north than it does now, that the Bitter Lakes were connected to each other or even to the Red Sea — the fact is that we don't really know. But it would be an act of folly to travel there today and say "This is just how it looked when Moses walked here."

The point, then, is not the specific characteristics of any of the places listed. The point lies in the words "Turn back."

How on earth could God make such an announcement? Some commentators pointed out that they were already following the pillar of cloud. Because they would obviously be way smarter than to blindly follow the cloud back into Egyptian territory, God had to speak to Moses and say "Hey, this is intentional. The cloud is about to move back to a place where the Egyptians can easily catch you. Follow it."

Would you follow? When God calls you to do something hazardous — say, move to Iran as a missionary — do you say "Sorry, Lord. I can't be that big an idiot. I'm dumb sometimes, but I'm not dumb enough to go to Iran"? Or do you submit?

Now, most of the time God does not call us to do some big thing. But what about in the little things of life? When God is calling you to do something that will clearly endanger your free time? Endanger your projects for the day? Endanger your wallet? When someone asks you for help? For money? When your child is having a discipline issue? Your parents are having a health crisis? Will you submit to God leading you into danger? It may not be danger to life and limb. But it can definitely be danger to your plans, your wealth, your ideas of what's best for you and yours. God is not a tame God. He had not the slightest plan of leading His children by the easiest way to comfort, personal peace, and affluence — not then, and not now. Rather, His goal was something else. We saw last week that He also doesn't choose the most difficult way. But you and I have yet to learn that unlike us, the Almighty doesn't automatically opt for the path of least resistance!

II. Yahweh Announces His Plan, vv. 4-9

Instead, His plan was this:

A. The Plan, v. 4

1. God Will Get Glory over Pharaoh, v. 4a

He would get glory over Pharaoh. God's plan was to show His power, greatness, and excellency. Pharaoh was a prop in the drama of God's self-revelation. And thus, the point of turning back into the Egypt-controlled zone was so that God could show His wondrous power and might in saving His people and in trashing His enemies. In eleven rounds now Yahweh has landed a knockout blow on Egypt's king. Forget best of 13; the record is 11-0. And God is now going to make it an even dozen. A dozen times in a row, He will beat down Pharaoh in order to demonstrate His own glory.

Now, we call this kind of glory-seeking evil and disgusting when limited human beings do it. When I turn another person into a stage prop in my drama of self-revelation, I am the definition of a psychopath and narcissist and all the rest of it. So isn't the Almighty showing Himself to be evil here? Not at all. Again, brothers and sisters, I urge you to beware of psychological terms. They are not immediately equivalent to moral terms. Psychological terms

ignore the Creator-creature distinction. Someone who is focused on his own glory is a narcissist. Doesn't matter whether he's human or divine, or animal, or what. Thus, in psychological terms the First Commandment is a statement of pure narcissism. But that is not the same thing as a statement of pure evil. The Bible is based throughout on the Creator-creature distinction. It is evil for Pharaoh to say "Thou shalt have no other gods before me." It is good for Yahweh to say "Thou shalt have no other gods before Me." And thus, sure, Pharaoh is a narcissist. But God is not, because He transcends those psychological categories. He really is the most important being in the universe and beyond it too; the world really does revolve around Him. Everything actually can and should be His way, because He made it, He owns it, and He guides it all to its appointed end for His own glory. Of Him, through Him, and to Him are all things.

And thus, God insists on getting glory over Pharaoh. He insists on leading His people back into Egypt in order to deliver them afresh and win round 12 in the match with Pharaoh. He will show that there is no God beside Him. He will show who is really in charge of Egypt's fate, once and for all. Do you worship the God who glories over Pharaoh and all His army? Are you willing to let Him be God, be at the center of the universe, be the one for whom everything exists — including your plans, your escape from Egypt, your place of employment, your health and family and everything else?

2. God Will Teach Pharaoh Who Yahweh Is, v. 4b

Well, the second half of God's goal in leading Israel back into danger is to teach Pharaoh that He is Yahweh. Again, this is only accomplished through Pharaoh's stubbornness. It's because his heart is so resolute that he will tangle with Yahweh once more. He had already learned that Yahweh was the only source of life and blessing. He had already learned that there is no wisdom, nor counsel, nor understanding against the LORD. And then God hardened his heart and he promptly forgot all of those lessons, just like he wanted to.

We have seen it over and over in this book of the knowledge of Yahweh: The most important thing we need is not deliverance from slavery, not political freedom, not wealth and prestige and safety. The most important thing we need is to know the character of the Most High. That's why He revealed His name, His identity as the self-existent Fire, and His determination to save His people and give them a way into His presence already in this book. And we are going to find out far more about what it means that He is Yahweh. But what Pharaoh is about to learn is that because He is Yahweh, don't mess with Him! Land wars in Asia are the pinnacle of wisdom compared to the folly of taking on Yahweh and fighting Him for His people.

B. The Preparations, vv. 5-9

So Pharaoh harnesses his chariot — as the rabbis say, he was so eager to catch Israel that he went down to the stable and hitched it up himself. He got his standard chariot unit of 600 ready and then went out after Israel. He was prepared for it to be a major slaughter; he was ready to kill a bunch and round up the rest and drag them back to Pithom, Rameses, and the rest of his building sites. And sure enough, the horsemen quickly catch up to the Israelites, who are not only on foot but even have returned back toward Pharaoh's military garrisons.

III. Yahweh's People Denounce Him, vv. 11-12

So the dust of Pharaoh's chariots looms up on the horizon, and Israel recognizes that they are in deep kimchi now. They instantly fall to the favorite habit of God's people whenever disaster looms: They blame their pastor! They even do it in a superbly ironic fashion, questioning Moses as to whether there are not enough graves in Egypt. The point is well taken: If you think Egypt, you immediately, to this very day, think "pyramids." And of course, what are the pyramids? They are giant tombs! Yeah, if you think Egypt you might think Nile, Poirot, British colonizers. If you're really with it, you might think of Abdel Fatah Al-Sisi, the current president of Egypt who has been in power since his coup in 2013. But those things will all come and go, while the pyramids will remain. Egypt is the land of graves, mummies, embalming. They are the experts on death. And suddenly Israel is right back to the conclusion that serving these lords of death beats serving Yahweh.

You can think, if you will, of the most dystopian military-industrial corporation — something that makes landmines, nuclear hand grenades, chemical weapons, killer robots, and all the rest of everything humanity regards as way beyond the pale of civilized warfare. Imagine that you work as a wage slave for this corporation, and are implanted with an ID chip that prevents their (smart) weapons from targeting you. (It's no help against the dumb ones, like mustard gas.) You get free from their clutches, but then meet one of the killer robots walking down the street looking for rogue employees who are trying to quit. What do you immediately wish? That you still had the ID chip that would allow you to boss the robot, or at least allow you to walk by it safely! Well, brothers and sisters, that is roughly the position in which 2 million ex-slaves found themselves as they see Pharaoh's chariots lining up for the charge. Honestly, the brickmaking wasn't so bad! Serving Yahweh stinks!

Are you ready to handle it when serving God costs you peace of mind? A job? A warm welcome in your home, among your extended family, or from your co-workers? Will you still serve Yahweh when Mammon has so much to offer?

The text raises that question immediately, right here at the start of the Exodus. And the answer is not looking so good for the people of Israel of old. Have we made any progress? When the going gets tough (and it will), do you hands-down prefer Yahweh's yoke to Satan's? Or do the pleasures Satan offers (e.g., revenge, malice, pride, getting high on opioids and meth) mean that you would rather serve him, in the land of graves?

IV. Yahweh Saves His People, vv. 13-30

Well, Pharaoh approaches, rolling up in majesty. As you see the drones buzzing on the horizon, the tanks beneath them, the missiles and smart bombs doing loops in the air over your head, who do you believe?

A. He Describes What He Will Do, vv. 13-18

Yahweh insists that He will save you. He saved you from the death of the firstborn, didn't He? He protected you from the plague of darkness. It took Him 80 years, but He saved you from the genocide that threatened the firstborn sons of Israel! So Moses announces the Lord's words to

Israel. They do not need to fight. They will not be required to cripple tanks, shoot down drones, or beat Pharaoh about the head and ears. They can simply keep silent.

Can you believe this? Especially when God goes on to announce that He is going to split open the sea behind you so that you can calmly walk away from this engagement? Brothers and sisters, we need to cry out, “Increase our faith!” The whole idea seems frankly a bit absurd. If God can split the sea, why doesn’t He do it immediately? The answer, of course, comes back to His stated mission of getting glory over Pharaoh. What’s more glorious? To hold back Pharaoh while the people walk away through the desert? Or to cleave the sea and let Israel go through, then hurl the sea back on top of the Egyptians, who are madly and hilariously racing *into* the waters because the sea is coming in faster across their return path?

B. He Positions Himself as Israel’s Shield, vv. 19-20

So Yahweh tells His people to trust Him. Then He moves out and positions Himself as their shield. The Angel of God, the Second Person of the Holy Trinity, not only assures us that He will protect us. He actually gets between us and the threat! “Anyone who wants to get you will have to come through Me.” And that’s how Israel spends the rest of the day and night. We don’t know what time of day Pharaoh caught up to them, but by the time Yahweh stands between Egypt and Israel, the situation is steady for the rest of the night. Egypt is helpless; they cannot penetrate the cloud, which is best visualized as a mighty pillar of cloud lit from the inside with fire. The fire is no ordinary fire, either. It is the self-feeding fire that appeared at the burning bush. Some think that we should see a reference to lightning here as well; certainly Psalm 77 indicates that God sent a massive storm as the Egyptians were crossing the sea after Israel.

C. He Keeps His Promise to Split the Sea, vv. 21-30

So the pre-incarnate Christ stands as Israel’s shield, keeping the chariots at bay. Meanwhile Moses stretches out his hand over the sea. Remember, it’s now getting on toward nightfall. The strong east wind starts to blow. Which side of the sea is Israel on? The west side, the African side. They want to be on the east side, the Arabian/Sinai Peninsula side. And yet the wind is coming from the Sinai side, which means that though Israel was protected by the pillar of cloud and fire, they had the nerve-wracking pleasure of watching the sea split *from the other side!* And it took all night, more or less. Talk about the need for faith! Talk about biting your nails! Israel stands there watching the sea open ever so slowly, hearing Pharaoh’s chariot horses chomping at the bit right on the other side of the flimsy protection of a cloud.

So finally, the cleft in the sea reaches to their feet and they pass through. God protects them, with the waters like a wall to them on right and left.

Once they are all well on their way to the far shore, God moves and comes back in front of the column — and the Egyptians immediately start pursuit, into the dark valley between the walls of water. God looks down on them. His inspection tour does not reveal anything good. He sees a massive force of warriors coming against His defenseless people, women and children and livestock and pets. And He sends forth a tremendous thunderstorm that confuses the tar out of the Egyptians. It’s still the pre-dawn darkness, they are in a deep canyon with surging waters on

either side, and it is raining so hard they don't know which way is up. Lightning smashes into the seafloor all around them, hurling horse and chariot this way and that.

And then, morning dawns, and God tells Moses to drop the hammer. As the first rays of the rising sun glance over the horizon onto the faces of the toiling Israelites who are climbing out on the eastern shore, Moses stretches out his hand again, and God brings the waters crashing back together. They come together more quickly at the place which was the last to be parted — the African shore. But the Egyptians don't know that, and they turn and race back as quickly as they can, literally fleeing right into the roiling waters. It's hilarious to watch the persecutors of God's people so utterly undone by their own folly. Within minutes, it's all over, and the Gulf of Suez glistens in the rays of the morning sun. No survivors crawl out on the beach. I don't know when you last tried to swim while wearing a bunch of bronze armor, but it doesn't work very well.

That's how Yahweh saved Israel on that day. Did it really happen? Yes, by God. Why didn't the Egyptians write about it, then? Well, I can name a few reasons: national pride. Official censorship. Hushing things up. The lack of eyewitness testimony from trusted Egyptian officers; more than likely everyone involved in the debacle was officially blacklisted, if not terminated, in the wake of a military disaster of this magnitude. But Israel saw it, and Moses was there. He wrote about it.

V. The Lessons of God's Deliverance, v. 31

And what did God teach us by bringing His people through the Red Sea, or its northern arm, what we call the Gulf of Suez?

A. He Is Yahweh

Well, though Moses doesn't say so explicitly, I think we can all agree that Yahweh reached His stated goal of showing that He is Yahweh. He revealed Himself as the self-existent one of whom, to whom, and through whom are all things. He has power over the sea. He delivers from the mightiest army the world can field. He is not dependent on anyone else; He helps Himself and He saves His people.

B. Believe Him

So believe Him. That's what the people did as they stood there and watched chariot pieces and corpses wash up on the beach. They started to trust that God knows what He's talking about. They started to trust that when He said "You won't have to fight this one" He meant it.

So believe the LORD. He has promised that He will never abandon or forsake you. He has promised that you won't have to defeat Satan because He will do it for you. He has promised that no matter what calamities befall you in this life, your future is safe in Heaven.

C. Believe Moses

Finally, the people believed Moses. We still have the writings of Moses. Because Israel really crossed the Red Sea by the power of God, we need to believe Moses' writings. The Pentateuch tells how God created the world, saw it fall into sin, and chose a single family to be the bearers of a coming Promised one who would save the world. Along the way, that family line went to Egypt; God brought them out and gave them a way of approach to His presence. He did this

through the ministry of Moses. So believe Moses. Obey the Ten Commandments. Look to the Christ about whom Moses wrote. And you will be saved, brought through the waters of death to the mountain of God for worship. Amen.