

Exodus 14:1-14

I. Exodus 14:1-2 — Then the LORD said to Moses, “Tell the people of Israel to turn back and encamp in front of Pi-hahiroth, between Migdol and the sea, in front of Baal-zephon; you shall encamp facing it, by the sea.”

Remember that the last known location of the Israelites was “on the edge of the wilderness.” (13:20) Ahead of them was the hostile, uninhabited desert, and yet *with them* was the Lord Himself in the pillar of cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night. And so now they could move forward, out into the wilderness, knowing that they were leaving behind them forever the land of Egypt – the land of their slavery.

Only now, just at the moment when they’ve arrived at the very edge of the wilderness, Moses is to tell the people of Israel to “turn back.” Those are kind of surprising words to hear from God, aren’t they? To turn back would seem to imply that some mistake has been made – that Israel had been going in the wrong direction. But if that’s so, then their new course, and their next place to camp would seem to be very clearly even a worse mistake. We can no longer be sure of where any of the places are in verse two, but we *can* still get the main point.

➤ “Tell the people of Israel to turn back and encamp *in front of* Pi-hahiroth, *between* Migdol and the sea, *in front of* Baal-zephon; you shall encamp *facing it, by* the sea.”

The point *seems* to be that Israel is to purposefully camp in a place where they can be easily hemmed in on all sides without any way of escape – without any place left to turn and run. The point seems to be that Israel is to *turn back* and then set up camp in the least defensible, least strategic, most vulnerable place available. To *all* human appearances, everything about this is just pure foolishness and stupidity. But as it turns out, the apparent foolishness and stupidity is actually precisely the point.

II. Exodus 14:3-4 — 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.” And they did so.

So why does God have the Israelites “*turn back*”? It’s to give the *appearance* that they are *wandering* aimlessly in the land. Why does God have the Israelites encamp “in front of Pi-hahiroth, between Migdol and the sea, in front of Baal-zephon”? It’s to give the obvious *appearance* that they are *shut in*, without any way of escape. And why does God want to give these appearances? – It’s so that Pharaoh might be lured and enticed to go out into the wilderness after Israel. It’s something like the Killdeer, a bird that nests on the ground and protects its young from predators by pretending to have a broken wing so as to lure them away from the nest. Only in the case of the Israelites, they don’t actually have wings with which they can take flight as soon as the Egyptians get close!

So Israel’s “turning back” and encamping “by the sea” is the human means intended to lure the Egyptians after them. And yet at the same time, God assures Israel that the ultimate cause of

Egypt's pursuit of Israel will be His own hardening of Pharaoh's heart. "I will harden Pharaoh's heart, and he will pursue them..." But why would God want to harden Pharaoh's heart? Why would God want to lure Pharaoh out after His people?

- "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.*"

So here's the deal – here's what's happening: *Israel* is to be the bait so that *God* will get glory over Pharaoh and all his host. *Israel* is to be the lure so that the Egyptians will come to know that the only true God is *Yahweh*.

Do we ever get **tired** of God getting the glory? I wonder if anyone in Israel would have liked to think that God already had enough glory over Egypt. God had already very much made His point to Pharaoh and proved His superiority over the gods of Egypt. So now can't it be time to move on? For right now, though, all we're told at the end of verse 4 is this: "And they did so." They did turn back; they did camp by the sea. And so now the lure is set. Now it's time to see what happens.

III. Exodus 14:5-7 — 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.

After the relative comfort of hearing all about God's sovereign plans from God's sovereign perspective, now it all begins to be worked out in "real time" and with "real people" making their own "real choices and decisions." God may tell us what happens in His heavenly counsels, but that's not actually where we live – we live here on the earth, right in the thick of things. And so this is where, no matter how much we've heard about God's sovereign control over every detail and circumstance, we can still very easily and very quickly begin to forget. This is where, in the thick of things, we can find out just how little we may really care for the glory and honor of God's name.

- "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 why was their mind changed? Not because God coerced them, or forced them. Not at all! Ever since Israel had left, Egypt had begun feeling more and more the effects of the loss of all the slave labor. How many of Pharaoh's numerous building projects must have slowed way down, or even come to a complete halt? And *now* Pharaoh receives news that after coming to the very edge of the wilderness, the Israelites have all of a sudden turned back and are now camped in a place that has no way of escape. So what's this going to look like to Pharaoh – the worshiper of false gods? It looks like, after all, Israel's God is not so different from the gods of Egypt. He, too, must be fickle and changeable. Maybe the Israelites have done something to make Him angry. Maybe after bringing the Israelites out to the edge of the wilderness, He'd simply become bored with the people and moved on. That certainly wouldn't be unlike any of the gods that the

Egyptians worshiped! (cf. Stuart) Whatever the case, the apparent aimless wandering of the Israelites, and now their encampment in the middle of a virtual trap must have led Pharaoh to believe that Israel's God would no longer need to be reckoned with. A different time, a different place, different circumstances — all of this meant that now, when it came to Israel's God, things could be different.

➤ *So...* “[Pharaoh] 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.”

Here was Pharaoh's most elite, most advanced fighting force — “six hundred chosen chariots” — *in addition* to “all the other chariots of Egypt with officers over all of them,” *in addition* to the regular armed infantry. Now the fact is that just the six hundred chosen chariots would have been more than enough. In those days, chariots were like tanks. If you were in a place where the enemy could engage in chariot warfare and you didn't have chariots, there was no point in even fighting — there was no hope whatsoever. The Egyptians have probably at least one thousand horse-drawn chariots while the Israelites have not a single one — and probably very few weapons of any kind at all.

So now it's tempting to get nervous. Or at least it would be if you knew what was coming. But the Israelites don't know. All they know is that God plans to get glory over the Egyptians, so that the Egyptians will know that He is Yahweh — the only *true* God. Indeed, so far all we really know is that Pharaoh has set out in pursuit. The bait was successful. The lure has worked. Everything is proceeding *according to plan*. So what's next on the agenda? — Well, God somehow gets glory over the Egyptians. Isn't that the *very next thing* on the agenda?

IV. Exodus 14:8–9 — 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 triumphantly.* 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.

These two verses read just like a transcript of God's plan. The Lord said that He would harden Pharaoh's heart (v. 4), and He *has* hardened Pharaoh's heart. The Lord said that He would cause Pharaoh to pursue the Israelites (v. 4) and now that's just exactly what Pharaoh has done. The Lord told the Israelites to camp by the sea in front of Pi-hahiroth and Baal-zephon as bait for the Egyptians, and now we're reminded that when the Egyptians overtake the Israelites they are precisely where God told them to be — encamped at the sea, by Pi-hahiroth, in front of Baal-zephon. Everything is in order. Everything is all in hand.

Only God never said that the Egyptians would actually “overtake” the Israelites. For that matter, God never mentioned Pharaoh's 600 chosen chariots, along with all the rest of his chariots with captains over all of them, along with all his horsemen and his army. And so we read in verse ten:

V. Exodus 14:10a — When Pharaoh drew near, the people of Israel lifted up their eyes, and behold, the Egyptians were marching after them...

* Cf. Labuschagne; referenced in Hamilton (literally: “with a high hand”)

By every human standard, by every human measure, by every human evaluation, *this* is an utterly *hopeless* situation. Everywhere you look, there's no place to run – as if outrunning the Egyptians would have been possible anyway. On the other hand, even if the people would have been willing to fight the Egyptians, there was no way to do it. They had no swords, or spears, or bows, much less even a single chariot.

So the Israelites are left with only two choices: *Faith* and a triumphant *hope*, or unbelief and a terrifying despair. In support of faith and hope is the word of God – that He will get glory over Pharaoh and all his host, and that the Egyptians will know that He is Yahweh, the only true God. But in apparent support of unbelief and despair is Pharaoh “drawing near” – the Israelites “lifting up their eyes,” and “behold, the Egyptians... marching after them.”

You see, here's the tension: The very strategy that was intended to lure the Egyptians to some kind of bad end has now also resulted in a situation that for the Israelites could not possibly appear to be more hopeless. But God had not said anything about this to the Israelites. We have to remember that! All that He had said was this: “And I will get glory over Pharaoh and all his host, and the Egyptians shall know that I am YAHWEH.” So what will win out? – Faith and triumphant hope, or unbelief and despair? “When Pharaoh drew near, the people of Israel lifted up their eyes, and behold, the Egyptians were marching after them...”

VI. Exodus 14:10b — And they feared greatly.

They were greatly afraid. Or I think we could say that the meaning of the text is this: They were filled with terror. It shouldn't take much for all of us here to imagine this terror. With their own eyes now they could see Pharaoh drawing near – the full military might of the Egyptians marching after them.

But did anyone say: God has said that *He will get glory* over Pharaoh and all his host, and the Egyptians will know that *He is Yahweh!*” No. And why not? Because a zeal for God's glory was not yet something that the Israelites understood. A true zeal for God's glory was like a completely and totally foreign language to the Israelites. They might have responded like this: “Don't tell me about God's glory. That's irrelevant to me right now. Just tell me how God's going to get me out of this.” In fact, this summarizes exactly how the Israelites actually *did* respond. Listen to their words in contrast with the word of Yahweh.

VII. Exodus 14:10c–12 — 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.”

Now we could easily pick apart the Israelites' response, but the whole essence of what they're saying is this: “Me, me, me... us, us, us... me, me, me.” And so it's no wonder that they were greatly afraid! It's no wonder that the word of God brought them zero comfort or assurance or peace of any kind! The Israelites were fundamentally driven, deep, deep down, by nothing other than a zeal for their own happiness *first of all*. So when God speaks about His glory, it's

something they can't comprehend. It's like a totally foreign language. When God comforts Israel with His zeal for His glory first of all, Israel is not comforted – because it's not God's glory that Israel loves. And so when the Egyptians actually show up—when things appear to be the most hopeless—it's not faith and hope that rules the day, but rather fear and despair, and even ultimately the seeds of disobedience and rebellion against God. And why is this, again? It's because when God says, "I will get glory over Pharaoh and all his host, and the Egyptians shall know that I am YAHWEH," the infinite comfort in these words—and there *is* infinite comfort in these words—is completely drowned out by a deafening chorus of "me, me, me."

So will God abandon the Israelites *now*? Will He let the Egyptians have their way with this ungrateful, unbelieving, self-centered people? It would be *so very easy*. Listen, now, to Moses' response:

VIII. Exodus 14:13–14 — And Moses said to the people, "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."

How can Moses be so confident when all the rest of the people are so totally overwhelmed with fear? It's really very deceptively simple! It's because Moses has come to love God's glory. And Moses understands now that it's because of God's zeal for His own glory that the Israelites can be absolutely and fully assured of their own salvation – especially when things appear to be the most hopeless.

But then what about this: How can Moses be so confident when the *reason* all the rest of the people are overwhelmed with fear is because they are so totally self-centered, and so completely unconcerned about God's glory? And can't you see, now, that the answer is one and the same! It's because Moses has come to love God's glory. And so when God says, "I will get glory over Pharaoh and all his host, and the Egyptians shall know that I am YAHWEH," what Moses hears is the most powerful, most indisputable, most irrevocable assurance and guarantee of Israel's salvation that God could ever give – even in the face of Israel's selfishness and unbelief. Is this also, then, what we hear?

God's commitment to you is intimately tied together with His commitment to His own glory. (Isa. 44:23 [cf. 49:3]; John 17:10; 2 Thess. 1:10) God's zeal for you is intimately tied together with His zeal for His own glory. And so when we truly love God's glory—*first of all*—then what we are loving, and what we *will experience*, is the full assurance of our own salvation – the most powerful and wonderful assurance we could ever know. This is the assurance that the Israelites forfeited, but that we can have today if we will see that God has chosen to be greatly glorified in the salvation, and the redemption of you and of me.

But maybe we still think it must be really hard to have this kind of full assurance when we have our backs to the sea, no ability to fight, and then we lift up our eyes, and behold, the Egyptians are marching after us. Maybe we think that when things are this hopeless, we can be justified in our doubt and fear. In fact, the opposite is true – though it may seem inside out and upside down. The more hopeless the situation, the *stronger* should our *assurance* grow. Because the more hopeless the situation, the *greater* the revelation of God's *glory*.

God *purposefully* brought Israel to the end of all hope by telling them to camp by the sea, and then allowing them to see the Egyptians marching after them – *so that* they might see and rejoice in the *full* glory of His salvation. Listen again to Moses’ words:

- “Fear not, stand firm, and see the salvation of Yahweh, 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 *whole purpose* of *seeing* the Egyptians – the whole purpose of being brought to the end of all earthly hope – is *so that* we might *see* the *full glory* of God’s salvation. And so when things appear to be the most hopeless, that’s precisely when we *can* be filled with the *fullest assurance* – because we’re true lovers of God’s glory, *first of all*.

God’s “entrapment” of His people between the Egyptians and the sea is really just a picture of God’s “entrapment” of His people with the Law at Mount Sinai. The Apostle Paul writes:

- Romans 7:7–9, 13 — If it had not been for the law, I would not have known sin. For I would not have known what it is to covet if the law had not said, “You shall not covet.” But sin, seizing an opportunity through the commandment, produced in me all kinds of covetousness. For apart from the law, sin lies dead. I was once alive apart from the law, but when the commandment came, sin came alive and I died... Did that which is good, then, bring death to me? By no means! It was sin, producing death in me through what is good, in order that sin might be shown to be sin, and through the commandment might become sinful beyond measure.

Why was the Law given? So that we might *see* the utter hopelessness of our condition. And so that seeing the utter hopelessness of our condition, we might then be ready to *see* the full glory of God’s salvation. And so it’s just when we see that things are the most hopeless that we can be filled with the *fullest assurance* – because we’re true *lovers* of God’s glory, *first of all*. Yes, it seems all inside out and upside down – but it’s not. So may we not forfeit the full assurance of our salvation as Israel did that day when their backs were to the sea.

Whether we’re tempted to despair because of our own sin, or because of sore trials, or because of the wickedness and hatred of the world, may we learn to see each one of these things as *reasons* only for a fuller and more wonderful *assurance* of God’s *glorious salvation*. When the Israelites *feared greatly* because they *saw* the Egyptians, Moses understood the point. And so he said to them, even as God would say to us every day of our lives: “*Fear not*, stand firm, and *see* the salvation of the Lord.”