

FAITH OVERCOMES FEAR

Eighth in a series by Dr. Rick Perrin on *Living by Faith* from Exodus 13:21-22 and 14:1-22
“As Pharaoh drew near, the sons of Israel looked, and behold, the Egyptians were marching after them, and they became very frightened; so the sons of Israel cried out to the Lord.” Exodus 14:10

When the French opened the Suez canal in November 1869 it connected Port Said on the Mediterranean with Suez, 119 miles to the south, and cut 6000 miles off the journey between Europe and the Orient. The canal quickly became the busiest transportation route for distributing oil across the world. In 1956 Egyptian president Gamal Abdel Nasser entered into a near-alliance with Red China and the Soviet Union and ignited a world crisis. The US cut off economic support. On July 26 Nasser nationalized the Suez Canal.

On October 29 the Israeli army attacked Egyptian territory in Sinai. On October 31 British planes bombed Cairo as part of a British-French invasion to capture the canal. Nasser sank a 320 foot ship to block the canal, then sank another 32 ships in the waterway and blamed the British. The United States introduced a resolution in the United Nations calling for a cease fire. The British rejected it. Syria blew up oil pipelines that connected Iraq with Mediterranean seaports. On November 4 the armies of the U.S.S.R. stormed into Hungary and drove quickly to Budapest. President Nagy fled and Hungarian freedom fighters fought Russian tanks with stones, hoping for American help which we were unable to send. A British and French naval armada sailed from Cyprus toward the Egyptian coast. On Monday, November 5 British and French paratroopers landed at Port Said. Amphibious landings soon followed. The Soviet Union threatened to nuke London and Paris.

In the United States President Eisenhower summoned his top advisors on November 6. He was afraid Soviet troops were preparing to attack British and French forces at the canal. He asked if our ships in the Mediterranean carried atomic weapons. They did. In fact, the Soviet Union was not massing troops in the Middle East. At last the United Nations agreed to send a peace-keeping force to hold the canal. By Christmas, the British and French had withdrawn. In Hungary, 40,000 freedom fighters lay dead. Tens of thousands of refugees waited with nowhere to go. I was a nine year old boy in November 1956, mostly oblivious to anything but my own life, but I remember well the fear that hung over the world, the horror of Hungary; and at school we practiced nuclear war air raid drills, lying in the hallways with our coats pulled over our heads. The world can be a frightening place.

Turn with me to Exodus 13 and 14 as we continue our consideration of what it means to live by faith. Today we’re going to discuss three things we find in the story of the Exodus that parallel our own experiences. **1. Faith Rocked, 2. Faith Responds, and 3. Faith Rewarded.**

1. Faith Rocked. (1) **Path.** Beginning in chapter 13, verse 17 we are told about the path that Israel followed as they left Egypt. There were two or two and a half million of them, men and women, the young and the elderly, and they were driving their flocks of

sheep and goats. They weren't moving very fast. The shortest way to the promised land was along the Mediterranean coast. This was the main trade route with plenty of food and water to support the nation. They could be at the border of Canaan in a week or two. But this way was heavily fortified, and verse 17 tells us God knew what his people were like. They were slaves, not soldiers. They would be like the Hungarian freedom fighters taking on tanks and elite Russian troops. They would be slaughtered, or what was more likely, they would run before the military threat back to Egypt.

So verse 18 says, "*God led the people around by the way of the wilderness to the Red Sea.*" Literally the Hebrew says it was the "*Reed Sea.*" Greek and Latin translations changed the term, so today we have on our maps, the Red Sea. The Reed Sea lay toward the southeast. It was a marshy expanse where the Egyptians harvested reeds to make papyrus which they used like paper. This is the *Bitter Lakes* region if you look at a modern map, and it's located approximately where the Suez Canal runs today.

(2) **Pillar.** Verse 21 tells us how God led the people of Israel--by a pillar of cloud. "*The Lord was going before them in a pillar of cloud by day to lead them on the way, and in a pillar of fire by night to give them light, that they might travel by day and by night.*" The cloud was a symbol of God's presence. One of our sons is an officer in the United States Secret Service. Barb and I were talking with him by phone the other evening, and he told us about a briefing by the Department of Homeland Security where the Red Cross distributed emergency packs that Secret service personnel can keep with them in case they face an emergency—a terrorist bomb, a poison gas attack. It included a small mask, a package of compressed oxygen, a pouch of water, a whistle to use if they are lost or trapped so rescuers can find them, and a glow stick. The glow stick was in case they found themselves in the dark and needed to see to find their way out of a building. Light is so important to prevent you from becoming disoriented. A small amount of light can change everything. God provided a light in the sky by which his people could find their way at night. And for you and me when we find ourselves trapped in the darkness of life, as we often do? The psalmist says, "*Your word is a lamp to my feet, and a light to my path.*" (Psalm 119:105) My friends, hold on to the word of God. Read it and keep it near you. It is your emergency pack that enables you to see in the darkness.

(3) **Problem.** But following God soon produced a problem for the people of Israel. Verse 20 says they "*camped in Etham on the edge of the wilderness.*" *Etham* is an Egyptian word. It may signify a fortress where Egyptian troops were stationed to guard the border. Israel needed to avoid these military strongholds. So in verses 2-3 of chapter 14, God guided them back and forth while they searched for a way through the fortifications. This made it appear in verse 3 like they were "*wandering aimlessly in the land.*" Proverbs 3:5-6 tells us, "*Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding; but in all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make your paths straight.*" It sure doesn't feel like you're going in a straight line when you follow God. It seems like there is one abrupt turn after another. It feels like you're lost, that God doesn't know where he's taking you. How do you square that with the promise in Proverbs? I recall the day I figured it out. I was perplexed because I had been trying to

follow God and it seemed that there was only one ninety degree turn after another. And then it hit me. That's how it feels when you're going forward. But when you look back and see where you've come from, what you see is a perfectly straight line. The supposed turns and twists in the path are really a straight hallway. You're simply bouncing off the walls as you move forward.

At any rate, Pharaoh believed the people of Israel were going around in circles, and that gave the opportunity, according to verse 5, for him to recapture the Israelites and herd them back to Egypt. He mobilized his army. Verse 7 says he called out 600 elite chariots, plus lesser chariot divisions, horsemen, and infantry. Chariots were the latest military technology. The Egyptians had had them only a short time. Egyptian chariots carried three men. So this was a massive force Pharaoh led out to bring the Israelites back. Verse 10 says, "*As Pharaoh drew near, the sons of Israel looked, and behold, the Egyptians were marching after them, and they became very frightened.*" They should have been frightened! Who wouldn't be? Do you have any Egyptians marching after you today? Do you fear what is coming in your life? Fear is a constant, persistent, unwanted guest that barges in and stays.

2. Faith Responds. (1) **Prayer.** In verse 10 we find Israel's first response to the threat that was bearing down on them in the form of the mightiest army on earth. "*So the sons of Israel cried out to the Lord.*" They did exactly what every Christian is commanded to do when we are afraid: They prayed. Fathers huddled with their wives and children in the sand and stubble of the wilderness and they asked God for help. Times of fear are wonderful opportunities to gather your children, or unite with your spouse, in fervent prayer. There are two things that happen in such times. One is that the family is united at a deep spiritual level. Your hearts are linked. You share the vulnerability of your fears and your faith, and that strengthens all of you. Then second, these are opportunities to teach your children to trust God. Let them in on the experience of faith and they'll learn how God provides. These are moments your kids will never forget. They learn how to manage their own future troubles. You don't have to be eloquent. You don't have to fake being strong. It's God who is the strong one.

(2) **Parrot.** I don't know what the Israelites expected when they prayed. Maybe they thought God would blast Pharaoh's army with a lightning bolt, or that the Egyptians would suddenly turn around and go home. That didn't happen. They kept coming. And suddenly the Israelites ran out of faith reserves. After all, they hadn't yet had much experience with God. Faith doesn't grow over night. So in verse 11 we watch as they stumbled over to Moses and lashed him with their fears. "*They said to Moses, 'Is it because there were no graves in Egypt that you have taken us away to die in the wilderness? Why have you dealt with us this way, bringing us out of Egypt?'*" Then they told him they wanted to go back into slavery. That's what fear does to us. It paralyzes us. Some friends of ours back in Pittsburgh had a parrot named Jocko. Jocko had a brain the size of a pea, but he could talk. One of the things he said constantly was, "Beat 'em, Bucs! Beat 'em Bucs!" That's what Pirate fans cried during the championship year of 1971. It's what Moses did for the Israelites. In verse 13 he said to them., "*Do not fear!*

Stand by and see the salvation of the Lord which He will accomplish for you today.” Faith keeps repeating what God has said. “God will “Beat ‘em! God will Beat ‘em!”

(3) **Promise.** It’s important to keep our focus, but look what Moses did after his bold reminder to the Israelites. Verse 15 says, “*Then the Lord said to Moses, ‘Why are you crying out to Me?’*” Do you see? Moses was afraid. He’d reassured the Israelites, but then he went privately to God and poured out his own uncertainties. “God, you will beat the Egyptians, won’t you?” And in reply God renewed his promise. In verses 15-18 he told Moses what he wanted him to do, and then what he—God--was going to do. “Tell the people to start moving.” God said. “And you, you stand on the hill and hold your staff over the water. I’m going to part the waters, the people will walk through on dry land, and then I’ll drown the Egyptians.” Yeah, right. Who could believe that? It’s too much, it’s way too fanciful. But Moses acted on God’s promise anyway and did what God said to do. You and I must act on the promises of God. The prophet Isaiah said to the people of Israel in Isaiah 43:2, --and the allusion is to the crossing of the Red Sea-- “*When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they will not overflow you.*” Once again, see the forward motion. Faith steps out and starts moving and God opens the way. Learn to live by God’s promises.

3. Faith Rewarded. (1) **Surprise.** To the people of Israel, the next thing that happened was a surprise. Isn’t it amazing that when God starts to answer our prayers, it surprises us? Verse 19 says, “*The angel of God, who had been going before the camp of Israel, moved and went behind them.*” The angel of God as the phrase is used in the book of Genesis and the early part of Exodus, always refers to Christ. When Jesus says to his disciples at the end of the gospel of Matthew, “*Lo, I am with you always,*” it is a promise that he is always with his people. In whatever troubles you face, Jesus is there with you. You don’t see him, and the people of Israel couldn’t see him either. They knew he was there only by the visible symbol of the pillar of cloud and fire. We don’t have that. We have only his word. Christ had been leading Israel. But now, as the danger was coming from behind, that’s where he went—to the rear. The Israelites could look up in the sky and see the cloud shift to the back and settled between them and the Egyptians. So Christ does that for you. He protects each of us by his presence. Don’t be surprised.

(2) **Support.** Verse 20 says of the pillar of cloud and fire, “*So it came between the camp of Egypt and the camp of Israel.*” On the Egyptian side the cloud produced a blanket of darkness that made the night impenetrable. The darkness that the enemies of God’s people live under is intense. We think the evil ones are almost invincible, but that is not the case. They may be strong, but they are also blind. For the Israelites, however, the cloud gave off a bright light. You and I are like that. As God’s people we can see. The enemies of God can’t. Do you remember a few weeks ago when the movie, *The Da Vinci Code*, was being prepared for release, many Christians were fearful that it would sweep away faith in God. We prayed. And it turned out to be a really bad movie and was soon forgotten! The movie was enveloped in darkness so that its message couldn’t be seen! God does that kind of thing. And then, when Moses stretched out his staff in verse 21, look what happened. “*The Lord swept the sea back by a strong east wind all night, and turned the sea into dry land.*” The road through the water had to be a path a

mile or two wide in order to get all of Israel across in the limited time they had. No small miracle. God will support you in your troubles. That's the kind of God he is.

(3) **Sunrise.** Israel walked through the sea with the waters, according to verse 22, held back like a wall on each side. They got to the other bank and turned around to look, and here came the Egyptian army! All the king's horses, and all the king's men, and all the king's chariots. "Oh, boy, we're still in trouble!" But then at God's command Moses held out the staff again. Verse 27 says, "*The sea returned to its normal state at daybreak.*" As the first rays of the sun began to lighten the eastern sky, the people of Israel could see what had happened. The Egyptian army was completely destroyed, and so were their fears. We fear so greatly while it is night. But faith overcomes. Keep waiting for sunrise. When it comes your faith will be rewarded. Dear friend, can you hold on for one more hour? Can you wait until God deals with the things you fear?

My grandmother was eleven years old, living in Carlton, Minnesota during the great Hinkley fire of 1895. I remember her telling about the huge forest fire that was burning unchecked through the north woods. Tens of thousands of acres had been blackened. Several towns had been consumed by the flames. The sky was dark at midday because the smoke blotted out the sun. All the men in town had gone to fight the fire. But it bore down on Carlton relentlessly, and soon the town was surrounded on every side. No escape was possible. Elizabeth Gillespie gathered her five children and called other women and children to join them on their front porch. They could smell the smoke. They could see the flames leaping high on the horizon. The circle of safety kept shrinking. Elizabeth said, "My dears, very soon we will all certainly die unless God chooses to save us. If he does not, we must pray that God will take us to heaven. Either way it will be all right." And so they prayed. "Father help us! Father, carry us safely into your presence! Father, turn away the flames!" Suddenly it began to rain, a huge thunderstorm that smothered the flames all across the countryside. Dear friends, God always delivers us from the flames. He creates a path through the water. He'll help you overcome all your fears. Hang on!

Preached by Dr. Rick Perrin on September 24 2006 at Cornerstone Presbyterian Church, 5637 Bush River Road, Columbia SC 29212 and Dutch Fork High School Tel. 803-772-1000
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