

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,  
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, October 22, 2017**

## **CROSSING THE RED SEA**

### **Exodus 14:5-31**

At lunch one Sunday, a boy was telling his parents what he had learned in Sunday school that morning. “Boy, was it exciting!” he said. “Moses organized all the Hebrews into a resistance group. They planned real carefully, and finally they broke loose from the Egyptians, who had held them as slaves. They moved as fast as they could toward this place called Canaan. They drove every kind of vehicle they could get hold of – jeeps, pick-up trucks, 16-wheelers – everything.

“But Pharaoh’s army wouldn’t quit. They used radar to track down the Israelites. They exploded missiles all around them and shot at them from jet planes in the sky. When Moses and his people got to the Red Sea, they thought they were finished. There was raging water in front of them and Egyptians behind them. Suddenly, though, the Corps of Engineers came to the rescue and built a pontoon bridge over the Red Sea and all the Israelites crossed over to freedom. Then, just as Pharaoh’s forces were about to go across the bridge, the Hebrews blew it up with dynamite and saved all the people. Then they lived happily ever after in the promised land. What a terrific story!”

The boy’s parents were more than a little concerned about their son’s overactive imagination. “Is that really what your teachers told you at church this morning?” they asked.

“Well, not exactly,” their son said. “But if I told you what they really told us, you’d never believe it!”

Some people, it is true, have a hard time believing the biblical story of the exodus of the people of Israel from Egypt and their dramatic, miraculous crossing of the Red Sea. But this historic event has been at the center of the history of the Jewish people for thousands of years. One author describes the Exodus as “the high tide of God’s power moving on the ocean of Israel’s corporate history. Their crossing of the Red Sea, escaping the death clutches of Pharaoh’s army, was a pivotal event” in forming their identity as God’s people (Maxie Dunnam, *The Communicator’s Commentary: Exodus*, 158-159).

In the same way that the Passover is to many Jews what the Cross of Christ is to Christians, it is also the case that the crossing of the Red Sea is to Jews what Easter and the resurrection of Jesus are to Christians. The themes of substitutionary death, redemption, and resurrection are common in both. About the connection between the two, Chuck Swindoll says: “The crossing of the Red Sea is to the Old Testament what the Resurrection is to the New. When the writers of the Old Testament wanted to refer to God’s miraculous hand, they returned to this event (the crossing of the Red Sea) more than any other. Just so, when a writer in the New Testament wanted to illustrate the power of God, he most often referred to the Resurrection. What the Resurrection is to the New,” says Swindoll, “the crossing of the Red

Sea is to the Old. While the scenes are altogether different, both were astonishing miracles of redemption from the hand of God” (Swindoll, *Moses*, 222).

Even though it didn’t happen quite the way imagined by a boy in a 21<sup>st</sup>-century Sunday school class, or even quite the way depicted by Cecil B. de Mille in *The Ten Commandments* starring Charlton Heston, what actually happened was not only dramatic but a mighty act of God.

### **THE LONG WAY AROUND**

After the account of their initial movement out of Egypt in Exodus 12 (verses 31-39), the story continues in Exodus 13:17 and following, where we are told that when they left Egypt, God didn’t lead the Israelites toward the land of Canaan by the shortest route. There were at least two reasons for taking the route they did. First, if they had taken the more direct route, they would have encountered several Egyptian fortifications strategically placed in the northern part of Egypt, as well as the possibility of military resistance from the people living in the Philistine country. God knew that facing military conflict at this point in their infancy as a nation could lead to discouragement and a desire to return to Egypt. So, the Lord led them in a different direction, through the desert, in order to avoid war.

The second reason for going the way they did is because of Moses’ desire, in accordance with God’s promise back in Exodus 3:12, to lead the people to the mountain of God – Mount Sinai – in order to worship the Lord there. To that end, as it says in Exodus 13:17-18: “When Pharaoh let the people go, God did not lead them on the road through the Philistine country, though that was shorter.” Instead, “God led the people around by the desert road toward the Red Sea.”

The most important thing to recognize about this is that it was *God* who led Israel on the wilderness road that took them to the Red Sea. It was *God* who was leading them. As He sometimes (or even often) does with us, God led the Israelites on a different path than they might have expected. Or hoped. God’s ways really are different than our ways, as the Scripture says in Isaiah 55:8. His thoughts, His plans, and His ways are not the same as our earth-bound ways of thinking and doing. Though it seems to make no sense to us from a tactical perspective, *God* led the people of Israel to the Red Sea, where it appeared that they were hopelessly trapped with no way of escape. They didn’t get there by accident. They didn’t make a wrong turn. Their GPS didn’t lead them astray. It was all part of God’s plan.

And sometimes God leads *us* in directions that seem to make no sense, and we find ourselves in situations we never expected, in places or predicaments where there seems to be no way out, apart from a miraculous work of God. Which is what God did for Israel in their extremity at the Red Sea. And what He continues to do in the lives of His people today, just as He has done throughout all of history.

## **SIGNS IN THE SKY**

The way in which God led His people – not the route, but the manner in which He led them – was remarkable, too. God led Israel on their route out of Egypt by means of a visible sign: a “pillar of cloud” to guide them during the day, and a “pillar of fire” to give them light and lead them at night (13:21). The cloud and fire were visible manifestations of God’s presence with and guidance for His people, showing them the way He wanted them to go. Throughout their journey, this sign of God’s presence and guidance was always there. As it says in 13:22, “neither the pillar of cloud by day nor the pillar of fire by night left its place in front of the people.”

Wouldn’t it be cool – wouldn’t life be so much simpler, so much easier – if the Lord were to give us constant signs in the sky, like these pillars of cloud and fire – to show us, moment by moment, what to do and which way to go? Don’t you wish God would do that today? Of course, God has already given us clear signs, directions and directives in the Bible. The Word of God *is* “a lamp to (our) feet and a light for (our) path” (Psalm 119:105), teaching us what we are to believe and how we are to live. True, the Bible doesn’t give us the explicit answer to every question we could ever ask or show us the right decision to make in every situation. But the Bible does reveal the heart of God to us. The Bible does clearly teach us godly and God-honoring principles to live by, principles to guide us in deciding what to do and what not to do, which way to go and which way not to go. So, while you might wish for a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire at night, or flashing neon signs in the sky, to show you what God wants you to do, do not ignore or underestimate the wealth of guidance and counsel and directives and principles in the Bible, the Word of God, which is the final and only infallible rule for faith and life.

## **ALL PART OF THE PLAN**

The opening verses of Exodus 15 tell us that God led Israel to a place called Baal Zephon, by the Red Sea (14:2). Baal Zephon, as Swindoll says, was a geographical cul-de-sac. A dead end. To the north, as we have noted, were some formidable Egyptian fortresses. To the south lay the vast Egyptian desert. To the west, the land of Goshen and the city of Rameses, from which the Israelites had come. They couldn’t go back there. The Lord wouldn’t let them go back there. To the east was the Red Sea. Today, the part of the Red Sea where the Israelites would cross to escape the Egyptians is what we call the Gulf of Suez. The northernmost section of the gulf was the “sea of reeds,” as the Red Sea is often called in the Bible (Swindoll, 215).

The bottom line is that Moses and the Israelites found themselves boxed in, with no way out. It was kind of like turning into a dead-end alley when you’re being chased by a car full of murderers.

Amazingly, God told Moses this was all part of His plan to lure Pharaoh into a trap, to defeat Pharaoh once and for all, and to glorify Himself as the Lord God Almighty (14:3-4). Just as amazingly, Moses believed God. He took God at His word, regardless of how counter-

intuitive it seemed. He demonstrated an incredible faith in God. And He obeyed God. He did what God told him and the people of Israel to do.

I wish I had as much faith as Moses exhibited in that situation. Not that Moses was a paragon of faith at every moment in his life. But at this particular moment, in this particular situation, when the conventional wisdom would be to go in another direction, in any other direction, Moses chose to trust God. I wish I had that kind of faith – to trust God when, from a human point of view, it just doesn't make any sense. Because God *is* trustworthy. No matter the circumstances. No matter the challenges. God. Is. Trustworthy.

You and I, I'm afraid, are too often more like the people of Israel, who, when they realized Pharaoh and his army were pursuing them and, it seemed, had them trapped, went into full panic mode and cried out in their terror to the Lord (14:10). Then, they turned their verbal guns on Moses, accusing him of leading them to certain death at the hands of the Egyptians. "Moses," they said, "it's all your fault that we're in this predicament" (14:11-12).

Moses, though, held firm in his faith. He said to the people: "Don't be afraid. Stand firm and watch what the Lord will do. You won't have to do anything. Just stand still and God will take care of you" (14:13-14). There is a lesson here for us. When you find yourself in a situation where you don't know what to do – a situation in which there is nothing you can do – don't let fear get the better of you. Don't let fear control you. Stand still and wait for the Lord to act. Wait for the Lord to make a way for you where there seems to be no way.

### **GOD WILL MAKE A WAY**

There is a song by Don Moen that goes like this:

God will make a way  
Where there seems to be no way  
He works in ways we cannot see  
He will make a way for me

He will be my guide  
Hold me closely to His side  
With love and strength for each new day  
He will make a way  
He will make a way

By a roadway in the wilderness, He'll lead me  
And rivers in the desert will I see  
Heaven and earth will fade but His Word will still remain  
And He will do something new today

Oh, God will make a way  
Where there seems to be no way  
He works in ways we cannot see

He will make a way for me

He will be my guide  
 Hold me closely to His side  
 With love and strength for each new day  
 He will make a way  
 He will make a way

(By Don Moen, C. Capitol Christian Music Group, 1990)

God made a way for the people of Israel where there seemed to be no way. It took a miraculous act of God to save the people of Israel from Pharaoh and his fast-approaching army. But God made a way through the sea. He used a strong east wind to drive the sea back and to turn it into dry ground for the people of Israel to walk across. But regardless of secondary causes, it was God who made the way. It was God who did it. And God still makes a way where there seems to be no way today.

When you are facing a challenge that stretches you beyond your limits, when you find yourself in some impossible situation, when the future looks bleak or uncertain at best, don't be afraid. If God has brought you to it, He can bring you through it. Do not be anxious. Do not panic. Do not throw in the towel. Stand still. Wait for the Lord. Watch what He will do. And when He tells you to act, don't hold back. You see, there is a time for everything (Ecclesiastes 3:1). There is a time to stand still. And there is a time to move forward.

God parted the Red Sea for the people of Israel to cross, but they had to put one foot in front of another. After God parted the waters, they had to walk across with a wall of water on either side of them. They had to trust and obey.

Because they did, they were saved. And, as He had promised, God brought disaster on the Egyptians who pursued them by causing the wheels of their chariots to come off and then drowning them in the Sea as the water returned to its place and came crashing down over them. It was all part of God's plan to save His people and to bring glory to His name. God made a way where there seemed to be no way, no how. "That day," as it says in verse 30, "the LORD saved Israel from the hands of the Egyptians."

### **THE LORD IS STILL GOD**

You may or may not be familiar with the name Gladys Aylward. She grew up poor in London a century ago and began working as a housemaid in her early teens. But she sensed God calling her to go to China as a missionary. Her story is told in the 1958 movie *The Inn of the Sixth Happiness*, in which Ingrid Bergman portrayed Gladys. When the Japanese invade China in the 1930s, Gladys, with only one helper, led more than 100 orphans over the mountains from Yangcheng to a free part of China. In the midst of their harrowing journey, Gladys began to lose hope of ever reaching safety. A 13-year-old orphan girl reminded her of the story of Moses and the Israelites crossing the Red Sea. "But I am not Moses!" Gladys said in desperation.

“Of course, you aren’t,” the girl said, “but the Lord is still God!” When Gladys and the orphans made it to safety, it proved once again that no matter how overwhelmed we feel, and no matter how inadequate we are, God is still God. Jesus is still Lord. And we can still trust Him. Because He is able.

If God could rescue the people of Israel by parting the waters of the Red Sea for them to cross over on dry ground – and He did; if God would give His own Son to die in our place on the cross – and He did; if God could raise Jesus from the dead – and He did; is there anything God cannot do today? Is there anything too difficult for Him?

You are not Moses. And neither am I. And God promises none of us an easy passage through this life. But God is still God. Jesus is still Lord. And He is able. May we never doubt and never forget.

Lord, let it be so in us. Amen.