

THE GRAND ESCAPE.

No. 8. Free to Face a Challenge.

Moses was 80. Forty years of Egyptian palace training, 40 years of desert shepherd training, and a life-changing encounter with God; now Moses faced the task for which the Lord had been preparing him for the last 80 years. Not once in his life did God ever desert him; He was always there, guiding, encouraging and inspiring him.

The great day of escape from Egypt must be remembered for the generations to come and God instructed Moses in Genesis chapter 13, that every firstborn male must be consecrated to God as a constant reminder that Israel had been saved from the death of their firstborn by their faith and obedience to God. God's graciousness was in this edict; pastoral animals must be actually sacrificed, but donkeys, essential for transport, could have lambs as their substitute sacrifice. A son was to be redeemed by an animal, and dedicated to God in his life, just as Paul counselled in Romans 12:1 to "offer your bodies as *living sacrifices*, holy and pleasing to God." In Luke 2:22-24 Mary and Joseph brought Jesus to the Temple "with a pair of doves" to consecrate him as Mary's firstborn son: as God's firstborn Son he was the epitome of every preceding such consecration, wholly devoted to his Father, and through his shed blood, able to save us from death in return for our faith and obedience. The dedication of the firstborn in Israel through the following centuries looked forward to Christ.

I can't do better here than to quote Colossians 1:15-20, on the supremacy of Christ. "He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For by him all things were created He is before all things, and in him all things hold together. And he is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything he might have the supremacy. For God was pleased to have all His fullness dwell in him, and through him to reconcile to Himself all things by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross."

God as the captain of this fledgling army was the perfect strategist. The shortest way to the Promised Land was to hug the Mediterranean coast through the heavily-fortified trade route of Philistine territory, but though the Israelites were armed they were not well-trained in warfare and any defeat by the locals could discourage them and leave them vulnerable to the Egyptians who might change their minds and re-capture them. So God led them by the desert road towards the Red Sea, going ahead in a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night, giving them enough light to keep travelling.

Notice verse 19 where the faith of Joseph was honoured after 430 years, the time of Israel's sojourn in Egypt. Joseph had instructed, "God will surely come to your aid, and then you must carry my bones up with you from this place."(Genesis 50:25.) Moses duly complied; it must have encouraged the Israelites to remember how God had guided and blessed their famous forbear.

In chapter 14 God tells Moses to turn back on the road they had travelled and strike camp beside the sea. This would confound Pharaoh into thinking the Israelites were lost in the desert so that he would change his mind about letting them go, and come racing to reclaim them. That may seem like courting disaster, but God Who knows the end from the beginning, had a plan to free the Israelites for ever from the chains of Egypt.

And that is exactly what happened. Once again Pharaoh changed his mind and in a great effort to reclaim all that free labour he took 600 of his best chariots plus all the other chariots of Egypt and their officers, and started off in pursuit. For the Israelites it was terrifying; ahead of them was the uncrossable sea, behind them the savage Egyptians. Desperately they turned on Moses.

“Were there no graves in Egypt that you brought us here to die? We would have been better off as slaves.”

But Moses showed a monumental faith in God and replied, “Don’t be afraid. You will see the deliverance the Lord will bring you today. The Egyptians you see today you will never see again. The Lord will fight for you; you need only to be still.” In verse 15 God revealed His plans in encouragement to Moses, and the angel of God who had been leading the fugitives, went and stood behind them, sheltering them from the advancing Egyptians; to Israel the pillar of fire gave light, while the cloud left their enemy in darkness.

“The Lord will fight for you; you need only to be still.” Vital to remember that, when we are confronted with circumstances beyond our control!

Then God, in His surpassing grace, allowed Moses to cooperate with Him in the tremendous miracle He was working; He commanded Moses to stretch out his hand over the sea (verse 21) and all that night the Lord drove the sea back with a strong east wind and turned it into dry land. The waters were divided and with tremendous relief the Israelites marched through the sea on dry ground, the banked-up water protecting them on either side. We can imagine how long it took, for all 2 million or so to traverse that exposed sea bed: another miracle is that they didn’t stampede!

Notice verse 21 - God used a strong EAST wind to separate the waters. The Israelites were camped on the west bank, and God could have used a west wind so that they could have watched Him in action and been reassured during that long night. But God didn’t do that; in that dire situation He called for their complete faith without being able to see Him at work on the east bank! It was only when the waters had parted that they could see how He had been working for them all night! The lesson for us is obvious, isn’t it?

Of course the Egyptians weren’t going to let them get away like that, and pursued them right into the seabed; God was waiting for them. During the last watch of the night He looked down on the Egyptian army and threw it into confusion by jamming the wheels of the chariots (verses 24, 25). The Egyptians recognised at last a Hand mightier than their own and cried out to get away from the Israelites who obviously had God fighting on their side. Now the Lord told Moses to stretch out his hand again over the sea and the waters began to flow back to their place, covering the stranded chariots and Pharaoh’s entire army. Not one of them survived. Dead bodies on the shore were all the evidence Israel needed to know their God had saved them.

Most commentaries point out that the correct translation of “Red Sea” is the “Sea of Reeds”, and some would make an inference that the sea was merely a marsh which could conceivably be dried up and made navigable. No-one has yet found the exact location of this Sea of Reeds but the position of Succoth is well-known and most agree the Israelites crossed somewhere near the northern tip of the western arm of the Red Sea. It is important to remember the panic of the fugitives as they faced the *impassable* water, and God telling Moses to raise his staff over the sea to divide the water .. “and I will gain glory through Pharaoh and all his army ... the Egyptians will know that I am the Lord.” If there were reeds in the sea it is likely they tangled around the chariot wheels causing the Egyptians to panic, but as the waters flowed back to their place they were deep enough to drown over 600 chariots and all the horsemen – much deeper than a marsh! News of this cataclysm which was much more than a natural phenomenon, soon circulated among the surrounding nations so that they feared this God who personally fought for Israel. As for Israel, verse 31 says that when they saw the great power the Lord displayed against the Egyptians, they feared the Lord and put their trust in Him, and in Moses His servant.

The theme is carried on in chapter 15, where the great deliverance called forth a song of praise from Moses and the people. “The Lord is my strength and my song; He has become my salvation..... Pharaoh’s chariots and his army He has hurled into the sea the *deep* waters have covered them; they sank to the depths like a stone The waters piled up ... like a wall; the *deep* waters congealed in the heart of the sea.” And that lovely verse 13 which we can take for ourselves today, “In Your unfailing love You will lead the people You have redeemed.” Miriam, the sister of Moses, took up a tambourine to continue the song, and all the women took their cue from her and joined in with singing and dancing in praise of their mighty God.

It is significant that the amazing miracle of this exodus from Egypt was ignored by Egyptian scribes and recorders. No doubt they wanted no reminders of their utter disgrace; there were no monuments erected to the event! But for us there is a monument, in verse 15:13 quoted above; the God Who *redeemed* us by His grace does not leave us to find our own way through life, but faithfully *leads* us day by day as we trust and obey Him.

This tremendous miracle was a monument to the grace of God. He didn’t rescue Israel because she was an impeccable nation - she was a ragtag bundle of complainers; or because she had tremendous faith – she had hardly any! He rescued her for the simple reason that He had chosen her to be His own people, however failing they might be. His miracle at the Red Sea was not in response to their faith, but to inspire them to a greater faith. And today, salvation as wonderful as that comes to us not through our merit but purely through the grace of God, whose love for us sent Christ to earth to rescue us from the “Egypt” of our bondage. Our part is simply to trust and obey.

You would have thought after this that Israel’s faith in God would have been unshakeable: it only took a three-day journey away from the sea into the desert to destroy it completely. They could find no water for themselves, their children or their livestock and when they did come to the watering hole of Marah, the water was too bitter to drink. Their first instinct, as usual, was to grumble against Moses, and Moses’s first instinct was to cry out to the Lord. God had a ready answer; He showed Moses a piece of wood which, when Moses threw it into the water, turned the bitter water into sweet.

Verse 26 tells of a decree the Lord made with His people there and then, that if they would listen carefully to His voice and do what was right in His eyes, He would not bring on them all the diseases he had brought on the Egyptians, “for I am the Lord Who heals you.” That word “Lord” in the Hebrew is “Yahweh Rapha” – the God who heals. Egypt had some quirky and disgusting methods of “curing” illnesses. In contrast, the rules of hygiene given to Moses by God, recorded later in this saga, are unsurpassed in maintaining good health.

Then verse 27 brings us to a delightful respite from the rigours of their escape. The oasis of Elim had 12 springs of water and 70 palm trees, and gratefully they camped there. It was a great provision of God. Palm trees provide everything needed to sustain life. They can live for 100 years, and 3-5 can provide lifetime sustenance for an entire family. The trees provide oil, dates, fibre, coconuts, livestock feed, ropes, matting, medicine, vitamins and minerals. There was plenty of sustenance for all Israel, and a spring of water for each tribe.

The God Who thunders judgement also sends the gentle rain. He Who destroys the wicked carefully tends His flock like a shepherd. God Who parted the sea with a mighty wind, gently provided food and rest for the infant nation. Saint Paul declared in Philippians 4:19, “My God will meet all your needs according to His glorious riches in Christ Jesus.”

