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 Exodus 14:5-31
 Nineteenth Message
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FOOTSTEPS IN THE SEA

SERIES: A THEOLOGY OF WORSHIP

No nation on earth can claim a beginning as miraculous as that of Israel. God himself testifies to this:

“Indeed, ask now concerning the former days which were before you, since the day that God created man on the earth, and inquire from one end of the heavens to the other. Has anything been done like this great thing, or has anything been heard like it?” (Deut 4:32 NASB)

The *way* that God led Israel through the sea so reshaped the categories of the nation’s universe that the Exodus became the theological center of her faith and worship. Israel was captured by such awe that even centuries later, so fresh was the memory of it that she sang about it as if she was still dripping wet with praise:

**Your path led through the sea,
 your way through the mighty waters,
 though your footprints were not seen.
 You led your people like a flock
 by the hand of Moses and Aaron. (Ps 77:19-20 NIV)**

In our last study we saw how this final conflict was a powerful interplay between God and Pharaoh. These two monarchs plotted their opposing strategies, while vulnerable Israel was precariously caught in the middle.

Literary Outline (Exod 13:17-14:31)

- a God Plans His Strategy (13:17-14:4)
- b Pharaoh Plans His Strategy (14:5-9)
- X Israel Strategically Placed between Pharaoh and God (14:10-14)
- b' God Will Use Pharaoh's Strategy for His Glory (14:15-18)
- a' God Executes His Strategy (14:19-31)

At the beginning of the text, Israel is spiritually blind and can see things only from Pharaoh’s perspective. But by the end of the chapter, Israel is brought from unbelief to faith through God’s miraculous wonders. The story is supremely significant. It becomes *the* paradigm for how God delivers his people from the tyrannical grip of the world, the flesh and the devil. God’s path to lead us from unbelief to faith is, mysteriously, through the sea. Today we will examine Israel’s Exodus through the Red Sea as a macrocosm of our spiritual birth in Jesus Christ, the new Moses. My hope for us is that in the end we will come to grips with the magnitude of God’s saving act in Christ, so that we might never again feel insignificant.

I. Liberation Provokes Enemy Counter-attack (14:5-9)

When the king of Egypt was told that the people had fled, Pharaoh and his servants had a change of heart toward the people, and they said, “What is this we have done, that we have let Israel go from serving us?” So he made his chariot ready and took his people with him; and he took six hundred select chariots, and all the other chariots of Egypt with officers over all of them. The Lord hardened the heart of Pharaoh, king of Egypt, and he chased after the sons of Israel as the sons of Israel were going out boldly. Then the Egyptians chased after them with all the horses and chariots of Pharaoh, his horsemen and his army, and they overtook them camping by the sea, beside Pi-hahiroth, in front of Baal-zephon. (Exod 14:5-9 NASB)

The first thing we notice in the text is that Israel’s liberation provokes a violent reaction from Pharaoh. The narrator says, “Pharaoh and his servants had a change of heart toward the people” (14:5). As a result, Pharaoh quickly mounts a full scale military offensive to take back the slaves by force. With 600 chariots, his best horsemen and most elite officers, Pharaoh fervently pursues Israel’s multitudes, who seem to be wandering aimlessly and are presently hemmed in by the sea. With lightning speed they seize upon this opportunity of Israel’s vulnerability and have little trouble overtaking them in the wilderness. From a human standpoint, things look lost. But the narrator graciously gives us another perspective by bringing us into the divine council. We are told that though “Pharaoh... had a *change of heart*,” it was the Lord who had *hardened his heart* (14:4).

This play on the word heart depicts the intense power struggle between Pharaoh, who thinks he controls the destiny of his empire, and the Creator God, who is, in fact, the only true Sovereign. The significance of God “hardening” a heart does not mean that he is acting capriciously, against Pharaoh’s will. Rather, he is strengthening Pharaoh’s resolve in the choices he has already made, so that he will inherit their full consequences. The Lord’s hardening of Pharaoh does not violate the ruler’s freedom of choice; it merely confirms it. The apostle Paul expresses the same theology in Romans 1. Three times he says that God “gave them over” (Rom 1:24, 26, 28), describing the nature of God’s wrath upon mankind.

No spiritual birth ever occurs without severe repercussions from the enemy camp. We should anticipate and prepare for this, but never fear it. Ultimately, God is behind satanic coun-

terattacks. He will use and guide them for his own purposes. One of the most intense attacks which Jesus faced was the infiltration of the devil himself within the intimate circle of his beloved disciples. The devil took over complete control of Judas and used him to betray Jesus with a kiss. On the surface, it seemed as if the devil had free rein to carry out his vile and malicious schemes. Yet after the resurrection, the disciples understood that God had used Judas and the devil to bring about the redemption of the human race.

Pharaoh's advancing army evokes a strong response from Israel.

II. Counterattack Unmasks Unbelief (14:10-12)

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. Then 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 in this way, bringing us out of Egypt? Is this not the word that we spoke to you in Egypt, saying, '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." (14:10-12)

Entrapped by the sea, Israel sees no way of escape and cries out to God in despair. Her panic-stricken response leads not to prayer but to complaint. She saves her most sarcastic scorn for Moses, God's representative, as if he was totally responsibility for their plight. Israel can never be accused of a lack of honesty. With her enemy in hot pursuit, all her past doubts (5:21; 6:9) resurface, break out and explode. As Janzen suggests, "The acts of God that have, for a time, evoked worship and obedience (12:27-28, 50) are now reinterpreted retroactively as the ill-conceived or even malicious schemes of the human demagogue Moses."¹ Trapped between the Egyptian army and the sea, all Israel wants is to go home. Brueggemann observes: "It is difficult to sustain a revolution, because one loses all the benefits of the old system, well before there are any tangible benefits from what is promised. In their three angry questions, Moses' opponents utter the name Egypt five times. It is the only name they know, the name upon which they rely, the name they love to sound."²

In our spiritual journey, perhaps there is something beneficial in having our unbelief fully exposed. The shameful exposure does good things to the soul as pride takes a back seat to humility. I am reminded of Jesus' warning to his disciples that their fragile faith would crumble shortly after his arrest. Quoting the prophet Zechariah, he solemnly warned them with these words from his Father, "I will strike down the shepherd, and the sheep shall be scattered" (Mark 14:27; cf. Zech 13:7). Peter, however, was adamant that this word might apply to everyone else, but certainly not to him. Yet Jesus warned him that before a rooster crowed twice, he would deny him three

times. It didn't take long for those words to come true. Luke vividly describes that poignant moment:

And immediately, while he was still speaking, a cock crowed. And the Lord turned and looked at Peter. And Peter remembered the word of the Lord, how He had told him, "Before a cock crows today, you will deny Me three times." And he went out and wept bitterly. (Luke 22:60-62)

Those tears became the defining moment of Peter's coming to faith. Afterwards, he knew that even his faith was a pure gift of God (cf. Eph 2:8). Reading his letters, it is obvious that all his teaching is bathed in humility:

All of you, clothe yourselves with humility toward one another, for God is opposed to the proud, but gives grace to the humble. Therefore humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God, that He may exalt you at the proper time, casting all your anxiety on Him, because He cares for you. (1 Pet 5:5-7)

So we find that when we are at our lowest point, when our unbelief is fully unmasked and exposed, our eyes are open to see the work of God's grace. In this we come to realize what John wrote concerning the nature of our spiritual birth. For we are "children of God...who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God" (John 1:12-13).

III. Despair Opens the Door To Faith (14:13-14)

In the midst of the panic there is but one Israelite who does not lose his head: it's Moses. As Israel despairs of faith, he stands in the gap and points the way to faith. Moses' response to the despairing outcry of Israel might be called, in Winston Churchill's words, his "finest hour." These two verses express one of the most central theological truths of the whole book of Exodus regarding our salvation:

But Moses said to the people, "Do not fear! Stand by and see the salvation of the LORD which He will accomplish for you today; for the Egyptians whom you have seen today, you will never see them again forever. The LORD will fight for you while you keep silent." (14:13-14)

Moses refutes Israel's fear with "fear not." This common command is found more than 75 times in the Old Testament. It is often uttered by God or his representative angel prior to a salvation oracle of "good news" or assurance that God is on their side and is about to do a great work on their behalf (Isa 41:10-16; Luke 2:10-14). Moses gives Israel an entirely new perspective by inserting Yahweh's name into a situation where she could not, or refused, to see. What is required of faith is to "stand and see," rather than turn and flee. Israel is armed for holy war, yet in her first battle she will do nothing but watch (just as she will do at Jericho, Israel's first battle in Canaan). Israel need not worry about standing up to the Egyptian army, for God will take the initiative and fight decisively to the end. So Israel's destiny has nothing to do with the Egyptians and

everything to do with God, who is going to forever remove the Egyptians from Israel's "sight." The theme of "sight" looms large in this text, as God is giving Israel a brand new lens of "faith" through which she is to view all of life from this moment on.

The final word to Israel is silence. No battle cry will be given; no trumpets will sound. The Lord will fight the battle while she remains silent. That silence suggests that neither her "words" nor her "deeds" will contribute anything to the outcome of God's mighty act of salvation. Later, Israel will fight fully armed, but she will have learned a deep lesson in holy war. These are God's battles, and she is to fight in dependence upon him; there is to be no synergism.

The disciples' moment of silence came in the days surrounding the cross. Scattered like sheep, hiding in the inner recesses of Jerusalem, they contributed nothing, not even words of prayer, to the holy war that was being fought on their behalf. Like Israel of old, they had to be practically dragged against their will to witness the holy drama. But witness it they did, and over a three-day period they endured holy silence. In like manner, there are times when we are to stand still in silence. God cannot speak his Word into the depths of our being unless there is silence into which the Word can be spoken.³ But, as Dallas Willard comments, "Silence is frightening, because it strips us as nothing else does, throwing us upon the stark realities of our life." I wonder how many of God's glorious acts of salvation I miss because I am obsessed with activity. I identify with Henri Nouwen's confession, "I have to nail myself to my chair and control these wild impulses to get up again and become busy with whatever draws my attention."⁴

IV. Faith Leads the Way Into a New Creation (14:15-25)

Now that the door of faith is open, God instructs Moses that there is nothing more to do but get going!

Then the LORD said to Moses, "Why are you crying out to Me? Tell the sons of Israel to go forward. As for you, lift up your staff and stretch out your hand over the sea and divide it, and the sons of Israel shall go through the midst of the sea on dry land." (14:15-16)

At this point in the journey no more words are needed, just a gentle shove into the sea. There comes a time when you know that no amount of words for a friend in despair can change his perspective. But knowing that God is doing a deep work, time is your ally. All you have to do is merely shove your friend into the sea. For Israel, this act opens the door to an unbelievable new creation, with Moses having the privileged part of playing God's role. As events unfold, Israel relives the first three days of creation.

The angel of God, who had been going before the camp of Israel, moved and went behind them; and the pillar of cloud moved from before them and stood behind them. So it came between the camp of Egypt and the camp of Israel; and there was the cloud along with the darkness,

yet it gave light at night. Thus the one did not come near the other all night.

Then Moses stretched out his hand over the sea; and the LORD swept the sea back by a strong east wind all night and turned the sea into dry land, so the waters were divided. The sons of Israel went through the midst of the sea on the dry land, and the waters were like a wall to them on their right hand and on their left. (14:19-22)

Just as God separated light from darkness on the first day of creation (Gen 1:3), so now the angel of God and the pillar of cloud separate the Israelites from the Egyptians with light and darkness. And just as we find the "wind of God" (or Spirit of God) moving across the surface of the deep (Gen 1:2), and then God separates the waters above from the waters below on the second day of creation, so now a great east wind divides the waters (though they are turned 90 degrees!) to form a protective wall for Israel to march through the sea. And just as on the third day (Gen 1:9), when God caused the waters to be gathered into one place so that dry land appeared, so now the great east wind turns the sea into dry land once again.

The amazing thing about the first chapter of the Genesis account is how differently it reads from other Ancient Near Eastern creation accounts. In every other account, the creation of the world is lived out in high drama and tension as the watery forces of chaos constantly pose a severe threat to the new order. But in Genesis, there is a notable absence of conflict. God merely speaks and it comes to pass, with no opposition to his creative word (even the seas obey him), and at the end of a week there is Sabbath rest.

If you were an Israelite walking through the sea on dry land, with a towering wall of water on your right and left, you would have to conclude that your deliverance from Pharaoh was no ordinary event. It was nothing short of a new creation! If in those days Darwin's evolutionary hypothesis had been around, creating doubts among the Israelites about the credibility of Genesis 1, today her doubts were over, for it was being re-enacted with her on center-stage! Once she is safely on the other side, the miracles continue.

Then the Egyptians took up the pursuit, and all Pharaoh's horses, his chariots and his horsemen went in after them into the midst of the sea. At the morning watch, the LORD looked down on the army of the Egyptians through the pillar of fire and cloud and brought the army of the Egyptians into confusion. He caused their chariot wheels to swerve, and He made them drive with difficulty; so the Egyptians said, "Let us flee from Israel, for the LORD is fighting for them against the Egyptians." (14:23-25)

As night gives way to morning, the Lord is vividly depicted as leaning out from his high place to look down upon the Egyptian army. Unimpressed by Pharaoh's show of force, he simply makes a "noise," and the steady pursuit of the Egyptian chariots turns into the chaos of a Los Angeles freeway. The term *chamam* ("brought into confusion") speaks of a divine

rumble or roar that totally undoes his opponents. It is often used in the Lord's confounding of his enemies and routing them in battle (2 Sam 22:15; Ps 144:6). The effect of the consternation brings the Egyptians to the realization that indeed "the Lord is fighting for them"—a phrase that will later shape Israel's confession of faith in her song of victory (15:3).

After Israel hears the Egyptians giving glory to the Lord, the Lord commands Moses to do the second miracle: to stretch out his hand so that the waters will return to their place. In the process of fleeing, the Egyptians run directly into the oncoming waters, and in this way God "overthrew" the Egyptians. The verb *na'ar* has the sense of "to shake," or "shake off." Thus the Lord "shook off" the Egyptians like one would shake a tree to lose its leaves (Isa 33:9). As the waters "return" to their normal state, the creation is back to its original order, with Egypt no longer a threat. The theme of "return" frames the story (13:7; 14:2, 26, 27, 28). Earlier, God led Israel to "turn back" towards the sea so that she would not be tempted to change her mind and "return" (*shuv*, 13:17) to Egypt. Now there is no possibility of returning, as the waters have "returned" (*shuv*, 14:27-28) to their normal state and all the Egyptians are buried in the depths of the sea. These waters cannot be negotiated without divine aid.

If the first Exodus had the significance of a new creation, how could we expect anything less with the coming of Jesus? He played the role of a new Moses, securing a liberation far greater than that from the tyranny of Pharaoh. In the gospel of John, the language that Jesus uses with Nicodemus to describe the second birth is nothing short of a new creation: "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit he cannot enter into the kingdom of God... The wind blows where it wishes and you hear the sound of it, but do not know where it comes from and where it is going; so is everyone who is born of the Spirit" (John 3:5, 8). These are similar to the terms found in the Exodus, and identical to those which Ezekiel used to describe the new covenant:

"For I will take you from the nations, gather you from all the lands and bring you into your own land. Then I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean; I will cleanse you from all your filthiness and from all your idols. Moreover, I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; and I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you will be careful to observe My ordinances." (Ezek 36:24-27)

Coming to terms with the cross and the resurrection, the only words which Paul could muster to describe the magnitude of its significance were a "new creation": "If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation" (2 Cor 5:17 NIV). Christianity is not one religion among many that you are free to take or

leave. Its claims are far more outrageous. By giving our lives to Christ we are part of the new world order of a restored humanity that will one day possess a new heavens and a new earth. No Egyptian on that day of deliverance would have said, "It doesn't matter what you believe as long as you are sincere," or, "I'm glad you Israelites have faith, if it works for you." Their confession gave glory to the Creator: that we must serve him and him alone or die.

V. Epilogue: Fear of Pharaoh Is Transformed Into the Fear of Yahweh (14:30-31)

Thus the LORD saved Israel that day from the hand of the Egyptians, and Israel saw the Egyptians dead on the seashore. When Israel saw the great power which the LORD had used against the Egyptians, the people feared the LORD, and they believed in the LORD and in His servant Moses.

"Yahweh commits an act of inscrutable power that breaks the power of Egypt. Then the camera does a slow, sweeping survey of the shore, at the edge of the deathly waters."⁵ By the end of the Exodus experience, Israel has a new lens and sees everything differently. The previous night the Egyptian military machine terrified her, but by morning those grotesque weapons appeared almost laughable, like a child's toys caught in a hurricane. As Israel comes to see God's great power, with all the Egyptians dead on the seashore, her fear of Egypt is replaced by a holy fear of the Lord. She holds him in an awe and reverence that leads to commitment and trust. And not only is she willing to place her trust in the Creator Lord, but also in Moses, his representative on earth. You cannot say you love and trust God and not place your life under his representatives. This is way of the Exodus. It is the way to salvation and the path to eternal life. And in the retelling of the story, Israel is continually summoned to faith.

It's no wonder that baptism became the initiatory rite into the Christian faith. God's path is through the sea, though his footprints are unseen.

1. Waldemar Janzen, *Exodus* (BCBC; Scottdale: Herald, 2000), 177.
2. Walter Brueggemann, "Exodus," in *The New Interpreter's Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1994), 1:793.
3. Quoted from "The Water's Edge," http://www.watersedge.tv/disciplines_silencesolitude.htm.
4. Henri Nouwen, *Sabbatical Journey* (New York: Crossroad, 1998), 3.
5. Brueggemann, "Exodus," 795.