

Red Sea Rebirth

In the name of him who led his people Israel in the cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night, dear friends in Christ: The biblical account of the exodus of God's people from Egypt and their subsequent (overly long) time in the desert as they journeyed to the Promised Land is *the great* master story of the Old Testament. It's the one that defined Israel as a people. More importantly, it defined their special covenant relationship with the Lord. It was to these biblical accounts that every Israelite looked to see and understand what it meant to be chosen by God, to be rescued by him, to be given his Holy Word, and to be given his promise of everlasting inheritance. To Israelites any number of centuries after the fact, it was more than family history; it was *our* story.

St. Paul, writing 1500 years after the fact, wrote to the Gentile Christians in Corinth "These things happened to them, but they were written down for our instruction". That is to say, as Christians, it's our story too. We are to see ourselves in these accounts. What happened in them way back when is happening with us now in the present. And so in this year's evening devotions we'll be joining the Israelites on their journey through the desert of this world as we with them are led by the Lord to the *eternal* Promised Land.

The best place to start, of course, is at the beginning: in the desert. But let's review real quick how they got there. They *were* slaves in Egypt. Heavy burdens were placed on their backs. They were driven by cruel taskmasters. But no matter how hard they worked or how much they accomplished, their masters were never satisfied. They simply drove the Israelites to work harder and beat them mercilessly when they failed meet their impossible assigned workloads. And through all their labors and misery the Israelites never got one tiny step closer to what they really wanted: freedom, a place of their own, the ability to enjoy for themselves the fruits of their labors. No, that was out of reach. Their situation was beyond hopeless. They could never free themselves. Each day's hard work only brought them a step closer to death and the grave.

Then one day out of the blue Moses shows up. Says he's been sent by the Lord to set them free and lead them out. Sounded great. There was much rejoicing. Yes, there were some ups and downs on the way. Things got worse before they got better, which at times led to friction between the people and Moses. But nine plagues later, each one worse than the one before, and Egypt was left reeling and in fear. Then came the last and most terrible plague. Moses told the Israelites what the Lord said for them to do to prepare for it. And that evening while they feasted on unleavened bread and roasted lambs – lambs whose blood adorned their doorposts to mark them as safe – the firstborn of all Egypt died.

In the morning the desperate Egyptians begged the Israelites to leave their land. They practically threw at them their gold and silver, their precious gems, and all sorts of other goods. Please, they cried, take these things and go – because if you don't, your God will surely kill us all. And so the Israelites marched out as if victors in a war they didn't have to fight, laden with the spoils of war they had taken from their divinely defeated enemies. Their spirits could not have been higher. And, as we heard, the Lord himself led the way, appearing visibly as a cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night.

Strangely, he didn't lead them the way that seems to make the most sense. I mean, from Goshen in the Nile Delta, where the Israelites lived, to Canaan their goal, it's a fairly easy trip north and east along the coastline. Instead, the Lord leads them *southeast* into the desert wasteland that extends between the Nile River and the Red Sea. It's to make it appear to the Egyptians that the Israelites are lost and confused, that they don't know where they're going. It's also to give the Pharaoh time to reconsider his decision to allow the Israelites to leave. That's a lot of cheap labor that got away from him. So, what's happening is that the Lord is using the Pharaoh's greed, his wounded pride, and his desire to dominate others to get the best of him. It works. Out comes the mighty army of Egypt, the most powerful and best equipped force on the earth. At its head are six hundred war chariots, the Pharaoh's most elite and, justifiably, most feared combat division.

The Lord has directed Moses to have the people make camp on the edge of the Red Sea. He wants the Pharaoh to think that he's got the Israelites trapped and at his mercy. Again, it works. Sadly, when around sunset they see the Egyptian army bearing down on them, the Israelites think the same thing. They go from rejoicing over their great deliverance into panic mode, which in turn leads them to angrily denounce Moses. "Is it because there were no graves in Egypt that you led us out here to be killed?" they ask. It's rather ironic: one thing Egypt was known for was its tombs, some of the most elaborate that have ever been made in human history – not that a slave would have been buried in one of them. A quick hole in the sand served that purpose. And there's a lot of sand in Egypt.

The people also accuse Moses of being a troublesome meddler who led them astray. "Didn't we tell you to leave us alone and let us serve the Egyptians?" My, how quickly they change their tune. Slavery wasn't so bad after all, eh?

The bigger problem, of course, is not that the people have lost confidence in Moses. It's that they've lost their trust in the Lord. And that's why they're here. The Lord wants to show them "Look, I've taken you out of your hopeless slavery. Now watch as I to deliver you from the hopelessness of death itself."

Following his instructions, Moses tells the people not to fear, that again the Lord is going to fight for them. Meanwhile, the Lord's cloud that was leading them moves to take position as their rearguard, between the people and the Egyptian army. On the Egyptian side, the cloud is thick darkness that slows the enemy's advance. On the Israelite side, the cloud emanates bright light so they can see the way forward – their way forward that will presently pass through the sea. Moses raises his staff and the sea divides itself. Dry ground appears between towering walls of water. Nothing like it has ever been seen.

No, that's not quite right, is it? Think about what's going on here: the division of light and darkness, the division of the waters, and the appearance of dry ground ... why, those were the Lord's works on the first three days of creation. There's a message here. The Lord returns to the great acts of creation to say that now he is re-creating. He's giving rebirth to an entire nation, a nation that now passes through a watery birth canal to emerge on the other side a free people, a faithful people, a people filled with hope and joy and trust in the Lord who rescues from death.

As dawn begins to break and the last of the Israelites makes it to the far shore, the cloud of the Lord lifts from where it was acting as the rearguard to reveal the Egyptian army that has followed Israel into the water-walled canyon in the sea. The Lord throws the enemy into panic and confusion, creating a massive traffic jam of chariots, men, and horses. And then he

commands Moses to stretch forth his hand to close the passageway through the sea. It buries the Egyptians in a watery grave. They all drown. The power of the enemy to enslave and kill God's people is completely gone.

But like I said at the beginning of this message, this is our story too. It corresponds to Christian Baptism. At one point in our lives all of us were also slaves, subject to sin, death, and the power of the devil. And the devil would have been happy to keep us that way working away for him thinking that by doing so, we might be able to free ourselves and earn our way to salvation. But that can't work. It's a hopeless cause. No one born in sin can work his way to salvation.

That's where Christ comes in. He's our Moses sent to rescue us and lead us out. He does it by being the Firstborn of God who dies in our place, the Lamb of God whose shed blood marks us as his own. His death on the cross is that tenth and most terrible plague that allows us to go free.

But the salvation Christ achieved for us on the cross has to be applied to us as individuals. Baptism makes that connection. The Scriptures call it the washing of rebirth and recreation. It's our Red Sea rebirth, when we pass through the water to emerge as God's free and faithful children. Furthermore it destroys the power of the enemy to enslave and destroy us – so long as we continue to trust in him who by water and Word delivered us and has promised to lead us through the desert of this world into his eternal Promised Land.

But Baptism is the beginning of the journey. We've still a long way to go, and many challenges yet to face. May the Lord who has displayed in us his great power to save keep us faithful and walking in his way until the journey's happy end. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!