

Prayer

Dear Lord Jesus, You have taken all the pain, stress and trouble of life, and overcome it by Your glorious life, death and resurrection. Come to us Lord Jesus, and destroy our sin; remove the dangers and pressures of life and replace them with the joy, satisfaction and liberty of our faith. In Your resurrection power, save us and liberate us to be effective as Your people in this world. We ask this in Your name, AMEN

Prayer Suggestions

Prayer ideas

If possible in your normal routines of life, take a different path or an alternative route; pray, and see what the Lord reveals to you

On-going prayers

- **Pray for the farming community** Pray for any farmers you know, and the farming countryside around you. Ask God to bless it with fertility
- Give thanks for those who campaign for liberty and freedom
- Pray for peace, after the signing of the nuclear non proliferation treaty between USA and Russia

Meditation

(reflection on 'glory' from Psalm 3:3; Isaiah 60:1; Zechariah 2:5; Luke 2:32; 1 Corinthians 2:7; 2 Corinthians 3:9 and 1 Peter 1:8)

We praise You, Lord God for your Glory:
Your glory falls on us with sacred power,
Releasing gifts and opening doors.
Your glory shines like a powerful light,
Drawing people to hear Your Word.
Your glory is released in love and power,
Bringing salvation and releasing joy.
Your glory protects Your people as a shield,
Granting peace and maintaining security.
Your glory purifies like a raging fire,
Exposing wrongdoing and cleansing sin.
Your glory is the wisdom of the eternal Word,
Challenging the world and justifying faith.
We praise You, Lord God for your Glory.

Bible passage – Exodus 13:17-14:4

¹⁷ When Pharaoh let the people go, God did not lead them on the road through Philistine land although it was close by, because he thought that the people would change their minds and return to Egypt if they faced the possibility of fighting. ¹⁸ Instead, God led them by the desert road towards the Red Sea ('Sea of Reeds'). The Israelites came up from Egypt in battle formation. ¹⁹ Moses took with him Joseph's bones, because Joseph has made the Israelites swear a solemn oath that when God remembered them, they were under obligation to carry his bones away with them. ²⁰ They set out from Succoth and camped at Etham close to the edge of the desert. ²¹ The LORD went ahead of them during the day in a pillar of cloud to show the way, and during the night as a pillar of fire to give them light. They were therefore able travel by day or by night. ²² Neither the pillar of cloud by day nor the pillar of fire by night changed its position at the front of the people.

^{14:1} Then the LORD said to Moses, ² 'Tell the Israelites to go back and set up camp near to Pi-Hahiroth, between Migdol and the Sea. They must encamp directly opposite Baal-Zephon, by the Sea. ³ Then Pharaoh will think that the Israelites are wandering around the region without direction and the desert has trapped them! ⁴ So I will harden Pharaoh's heart and he will pursue them; and in this way I will gain glory at the expense of Pharaoh and his army, and all the Egyptians will know that I am the LORD!' This is what the Israelites did.

Bible Study

Review

The people of Israel had been liberated from Egypt. After an awesome display of God's power and might on the night of the Passover, Pharaoh had implored them to go. This was no ordinary event, for it was the Lord's unique work to liberate His people from slavery. It was God's intention that they would travel to their own 'Promised Land' and grow as a nation to become as a visible representation of His presence in the world. However, if we did not know what happened next (the story of the crossing of the Red Sea), we might expect that the story would continue with Israel marching across the desert towards their destiny!

This was not to be, and it is by no means clear what would happen next. Our passage today raises some big questions about Israel's cohesion as a nation, and the guidance they would require if they were to reach their God-given goal. To begin with, the Israelites were hesitant about the possibility of battle (13:17 and 18), and judging by God's command at one point to 'go back' (14:1), the route was by no means clear. Indeed, we also discover that God has unfinished business with Pharaoh (14:3,4)!

Nevertheless, the news was not all bad because in the first few days of their journey, the Lord appeared to the Israelites in a new and unique way. God led His people through the desert '*... during the day in a pillar of cloud to show the way, and during the night as a pillar of fire to give them light*' (13:21). This miraculous sight gave the Israelites the capacity to move by day or by night (13:21), and stayed with them as a constant means of protection and guidance.

To begin with, God led the people away from the most obvious route from Egypt to Canaan, which was the road north along the Mediterranean coast. Earlier inhabitants of that region had been close allies of the forefathers (Gen 26), but history confirms what Scripture says here that a new warrior people had occupied the coastal region, a people we will come to know as the Philistines (13:17). The people of Israel were wary of fighting these notorious people, so God directed them southwest towards the Red Sea and the desert regions that lay beyond. The people were arranged in 'battle formation' (13:18), but it was defensive and they were not yet hardened for war.

So it is not surprising that the Lord did not take Israel straight to Canaan where they would have to fight for possession of the Land. The direction in which Israel was led was unclear and must have been something of a step of faith, but first of all Israel had to trust her God. We who have read the story know that the journey would eventually transform God's people until they were indeed ready to fight for Canaan, but the people did not yet know either what lay ahead or the lessons they would have to learn from the Lord.

Clearly, once the movements of the Israelites we reported in Egypt, rumours would have circulated about how the Israelites lost in the desert and did not know which way to go (14:3)! Yet all this was in God's hands, for He intended to draw the Egyptians out to pursue His people. He would soon prove His authority over Pharaoh yet again in one further dramatic demonstration of His glory; '*I will gain glory at the expense of Pharaoh and his army*' (14:4). The Israelites did not yet know this, and we will soon find out that they panicked when they heard that Pharaoh was coming after them (see tomorrow, in 14:10f.), but God was with them, and He would win a victory over Pharaoh in His own way.

The whole of this reading therefore gives us the background for the story of the crossing of the Red Sea (ch.14) and the final defeat of Pharaoh by the power of God. It is arguable that this last event is the one most remembered about Israel's escape from Egypt.

Going Deeper

The Bible study goes deeper to look at these issues:

- Israel coming out of Egypt
- The change of direction back towards the Red Sea
- The evidence of God's presence

Going Deeper

Most of us do not have a clear picture of exactly 'what happened next' in the story of the Exodus. This passage gives us some clear indications about how and why the Israelites journeyed as they did. God was in control of everything, preparing for what He knew would lie ahead. The details of the story are not very specific, but help us understand that God was in control of events, despite the anxiety of the people.

Israel coming out of Egypt

All we know about the journey out of Egypt so far is this; they '*journeyed from Rameses to Succoth, about six hundred thousand men on foot*' (12:37). All the place names mentioned either in that earlier text or in our text today are unclear, and there is no certainty about their exact location. When we studied the previous verse, we noted that the place names were possibly symbolic, indicating the direction of travel, away from Egypt and towards the Promised land. Here in our passage today, the direction in which the people travelled becomes extremely important and significant. God was trying to lead His people not just to the Promised Land, but to the place where they would have victory over the Egyptians (crossing the Red Sea – Ex 14), and go on to learn to worship Him and hear His Word (see Exodus 19,20). Clearly, the general direction of travel the Lord required of His people was very important for their future; they did not know this, but their obedience and trust in God was essential.

Some scholars are dubious about the possibility of Philistines living on the coastal regions between Canaan and Egypt at the time of the Exodus. If you read other books about the Exodus, you may find this quoted as a reason for believing that the story was affected by the later, warlike reputation of the Philistines in David's day (possibly around 300 years later). However, there is good archaeological evidence and also the evidence of Genesis (Gen 21:32f.; 26:1f.) to indicate that a succession of different peoples lived in this region, some more peaceful than others; and all were called Philistines. Certainly, this route along the Mediterranean Sea was well used in ancient times by people who migrated to find land, and by merchants trading goods. It was the logical route to follow to get to Canaan, but because of the hesitancy of the people (see above) it was not going to be God's way.

The hesitancy of the people when faced with battle (13:17) sounds odd when only one verse later, the text tells us that the people left Egypt in 'battle formation'. Were they or were they not prepared for battle? This passage echoes the previous comments in Exodus that the people of Israel left Egypt 'like an army' (6:26, 7:4, 12:51). After everything that had happened, you would think that they would be ready for anything, especially with the help and guidance of the Lord at hand. So, were they ready for battle or were they not? The answer is that although the people were organised for war, they were not mentally prepared. This is the only way to explain the differences between verses 17 and 18. It also forewarns us of coming problems for the people of Israel. We will find that throughout the Exodus, the Israelites frequently complained and grumbled against God, even though they had the evidence of God's protection before their eyes. They often failed to be obedient to the God who had saved them (see for example, Exodus 16, 17, 32,33), yet in the end, the Lord kept them on track and led them to the Promised Land; but it is a journey from which we can all learn!

The change of direction back towards the Red Sea

On this occasion, the Lord gave instructions to change direction, sending the Israelites away from the coastal road in a southerly direction towards the 'Red Sea' (13:18). The Hebrew words which we translate as the 'Red Sea' mean 'the Sea of Reeds', and this has led to a great deal of speculation based, unfortunately, on the similarity of the English words 'Red' and 'Reed', which have no connection in the original Hebrew! What is clear is that by turning away from the coastal road, the people of Israel would have to pass across some northern part of the Red Sea as we know it, and this would either be through a large river tributary or marshy swamp with reeds, whether large or small. Yet the only name given to us by Scripture for this region is the 'Sea of Reeds', which must be an ancient name for some northern part of the Red Sea. Also, the term 'Sea of Reeds' could easily mean 'Sea surrounded by reeds', which could mean any number of regions around the Red Sea in ancient times. Some scholars make a great deal of saying that the Hebrew for 'Sea of Reeds' could mean that the Israelites merely escaped through swampy ground. However, it is unwise even to be this specific. We cannot know the exact place, and all Scripture reveals is the general region in which the Israelites travelled.

The change of direction is picked up later on in the passage (14:1,2), with instructions which appear very specific, but for which, yet again, we can find no identity today(see the place names Pi-Hahiroth, Migdol, Baal-Zephon – 14:1,2). However, we can easily see that the instructions were to camp near to the Sea, and as the Israelites had left the coast of the Mediterranean Sea, it is fairly safe to assume that the only other Sea in the region was the Red Sea! It becomes obvious to the reader that all this was part of the preparation of the Israelites for the crossing of the Red Sea, and it comes as no surprise to us who know where the story is heading (see above). It is important, however, to verify the story we all know and locate the crossing as

being at some part of the Red Sea, not merely some marshy or ground full of 'reeds' which was easily crossed by foot (as some have proposed).

The evidence of God's presence

The remarkable feature of this passage is the description of God's presence '... during the day in a pillar of cloud to show the way, and during the night as a pillar of fire to give them light.' (13:21). This is the first mention of this phenomenon in Scripture, and it becomes a major part of the story of the Exodus. It must have been a remarkable sight to see one great pillar appearing like a cloud during the light of the day, and then a raging fire in the darkness of the night.

There are a number of ways for us to give a spiritual explanation for this extraordinary phenomenon. Firstly, the description of cloud and fire reminds us of images of the 'glory' of God in other parts of Scripture (e.g. Daniel 7:9, Isaiah 4:5 etc), especially the presence of the Lord in the Temple (1 Kings 8:10). Before the coming of Jesus Christ, through whom we know God, the image of cloud and fire was probably the most used 'picture' of God available, as symbols of magnificence and power. Some have also suggested that the cloud was a form of protection from the heat of the day, and the fire at night a source of comfort and warmth.

This idea is a little fanciful because it is not mentioned in Scripture; indeed, when Moses was not present with the people of Israel, the people frequently rebelled against God despite His visible presence in the cloud and the fire. They clearly did not have a 'close' relationship with this great symbol of God's presence. The cloud and fire had a function, which was to lead the people through the wilderness, and to appear at Mount Sinai when the people were asked to come and worship the Lord (Exodus 19:16f.). There, God showed Himself to the Israelites in awesome power before giving the Ten Commandments to Moses (Ex. 20), and later when leading them away from Sinai into the desert towards Canaan (Exodus 40).

The pillar of cloud and fire is introduced in this passage as a firm indication of God's guidance of His people at a critical time in their history. It's presence with the people to guide them also mocks the thoughts of Pharaoh and his court, who believed that the change of direction of the Israelites was due to their being lost in the desert!

Application

The symbols of fire and cloud play an important part in the story of God's revelation throughout the Bible, and they have much to teach us about God's nature and His presence. In the New Testament, fire is a symbol of judgement in the story of John the Baptist (Matt 3:10f.) but also a symbol of the coming presence of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:1f.). Fire is visible but ultimately unapproachable, so we can sense its presence but only come close to it. We cannot hold it or maintain control over it. In the same way, God may be seen, experienced and approached, but not held or controlled because He is far greater and more powerful than us.

In contrast to this, the cloud is a symbol of mystery, for a cloud can be seen but we cannot see through it or beyond it. In the same way, we may see God (as is now possible through Jesus Christ) and follow His leading, but we cannot see through Him into the heart of God or see beyond Him into the future. These great symbols of God's presence are essential to John's vision of the future and the return of Christ in glory (Rev 10:1; 14:14; 12:12f.), when the journey of all God's people is finally concluded in the heavenly Promised Land of the New Heaven and New Earth!

Our passage today has been about the beginnings of a journey that was begun in the right direction, but which had to change. The Lord had to move His people so that they travelled in a way that was not obvious, but was part of God's long term plan, something the people could not have known. He did this so that He could do things that were beyond their understanding, with the possible exception of Moses.

It remains true that the Lord will often require us to travel the path of faith in directions that do not appear to make sense; but in the fullness of time, they will. If we stay close to our Lord, the pathways we travel on may seem obscure but they are purposeful, and we need to trust our Lord's guidance. He will do what is right for us, of that we can be assured, and although we may have many lessons to learn on our way, our faith and obedience is essential if we are to reach our ultimate goal.

Discipleship

Questions (for use in groups)

1. What does this passage of Scripture tell you about God's guidance, and does it remind you of any particular part of your life?

2. Discuss in your group all the reasons why God found it necessary to change the direction of the journey from Egypt.
3. If God led His people of old by a pillar of cloud and fire, how does He lead His people today?

Topics covered by this text

- *The guidance of God*
- *The importance of being ready to do God's will*
- *The cloud and the fire, symbols of God's presence.*

Personal comments by author

Guidance is something that is easy to talk about, but difficult to pin down. Each of us is influenced by a large number of things, from our personal attitudes and preferences to the circumstances in which we find ourselves, and the words people say to us. In addition, the way we process information in our brains is often not rational or explainable. Yet each of us finds our way from one thing to the next, and as time goes by, our life unfolds. There are so many factors at play here, I find it something of a relief to place myself in God's hands and as a person of faith, trust God for what happens. This does not mean that I am not active in making decisions and pursuing what is next, but it does mean that I do these things conscious that my Lord is with me and helps me all the way. I don't know how people live without it!

Ideas for exploring discipleship

- *Consider for a moment the nature of your own spiritual journey. Is it always a matter of walking in a straight line? How does the Lord lead you to change direction, and has this ever happened? Do you want to keep going in the same direction you have always travelled, or would you be happy for the Lord to change things? These are all important questions.*
- *Pray for your own church community and ask the Lord to guide you in your collective witness to Him.*

Final Prayer

Lord Jesus Christ, save us completely, and forever

Holy Spirit of God, keep our hearts aflame

Almighty God and Father, reveal our eternal destiny

Glory be to You: AMEN
