

Prayer

God of all hope and joy, open up our lives to welcome Jesus Christ our Lord. Then, when He comes, may the Saviour find within us a dwelling place ready to receive Him and a heart ready to worship and adore Him. All praise to You, Lord Jesus Christ, for You come into a repentant heart with love, and You live and reign in us with the Father and the Holy Spirit: AMEN

Prayer Suggestions

Prayer ideas

Set aside some time to praise God in whatever way you judge is appropriate, and where possible, use the psalms as a guide

On-going prayers

- **Pray for the farming community** *Pray about the arguments over genetically modified crops: that new technology will be used with due caution*
- *Give thanks for the abundance of God's provision for all*
- *Pray for Poland after the death of its President in an air crash*

Meditation

Jesus Christ and Lord of all; hope is a precious thing.
It keeps the spirit alive in anticipation of far greater things.

The Kingdom of Your holiness, come from heaven to earth;
The resolution of every conflict, in glorious truth and justice;
The satisfaction of knowing that faith brings peace with God;
The glory of all truth revealed and the wonder of perfect love;
The end of all speculation about the mysteries of Your grace;
The explanation of great miracles, 'how', and 'where', and 'why';
The revelation of heaven's treasury and the wonders of the world;
The answers to our questions and our minds set free 'to be';

Jesus Christ and Lord of all; bring us Your hope today;
And give us eyes to appreciate Your revelation of these things.

Bible passage – Exodus 14:21-31

²¹ Then Moses stretched his hand out over the sea, and the LORD swept back the sea with a strong east wind all through the night, turning the sea into dry land. When the waters were divided, ²² the Israelites went into the midst of the sea on dry ground, with a wall of water on their right and on their left. ²³ The Egyptians followed and went in after them into the sea, all of Pharaoh's horses, chariots, and horsemen. ²⁴ During the morning watch the LORD looked down on the Egyptian army from the pillar of fire and cloud, and threw the Egyptian army into panic. ²⁵ He clogged up their chariot wheels so that they could hardly be manoeuvred. The Egyptians said, 'Flee from the Israelites, for the LORD is fighting for them against Egypt!'

²⁶ Then the LORD told Moses, 'Stretch your hand out over the sea, so that the water may flow back over the Egyptians, their chariots and horsemen.' ²⁷ So Moses stretched his hand out over the sea, and at dawn the sea returned to its normal depth; and as the Egyptians fled before the sea, the LORD tossed the Egyptians into the middle of it. ²⁸ The waters returned, covering the chariots and the horsemen and the entire army of Pharaoh that had pursued the

Israelites into the sea; not one of them survived. ²⁹ But the Israelites walked through the sea on dry ground, with a wall of water on their right and on their left.

³⁰ So the LORD saved Israel that day from the hand of the Egyptians; and Israel saw the Egyptians lying dead on the seashore. ³¹ When Israel saw the great hand of God against the Egyptians, the people feared the LORD and believed in Him and His servant Moses.

Bible Study

Review

Today's reading contains the amazing climax of the story of the flight from Egypt by the Israelites. The Egyptian army had caught the people as they fled south from northern Egypt towards the Sinai Peninsula. However, God knew what He was doing, and in day of sheer drama, the Lord led Israel through the Red Sea with the waters forming a dramatic wall on each side of them (14:22). The salvation of Israel was only part of the story, though, and most of today's reading is taken up by a description of the chaos and panic caused amongst the Egyptian army as it succumbed to waters (14:25f.). The Lord had won His victory!

The story of Israel's escape is amazing. God had told Moses what to do beforehand; he was to hold his staff in his hand, lift it up over the Sea, and '*divide it*' (14:16), and this would enable the Israelites to travel through the sea as if on dry ground. This was God's means of escape for His troubled and hesitant people, and He had already planned their escape from this impossible situation.

One important feature of the story may go unnoticed, however, and this is the mention of the word 'hand'. The Red Sea was divided when Moses held His hands '*stretched out over the Sea*' (14:21), and when Moses reached his hand out again (14:26,27), the seas rolled back to their normal depth, drowning the Egyptians (14:28f.). In the language of Hebrew the hand and the staff are symbols of power and might, and God had given Moses a staff as a symbol of power when he was first called (4:2f.). Moses, in this story, is himself a symbol of godly leadership amongst the people of Israel, acting in obedience (see 14:16f.) and only with the authority God has given him (the staff).

Most of today's story is about the foolhardy actions of the Egyptians, who through arrogant self confidence followed the Israelites and attempted to follow the Israelites through the Red Sea. They saw that they were able to walk through as on '*dry ground*' (14:22) and sought to follow. This resulted in utter disaster as their chariot wheels became clogged (14:25), and they panicked (14:24), and lastly, the whole army was overcome by the waters of the Red Sea as the waters returned to normal after the Israelites had crossed (14:26,27). From a worldly perspective, this was a decisive military defeat for Egypt, but it was the Lord who had won the victory for Israel. He did this for several reasons, firstly so that His people would come to believe in Him, secondly so that the world might see God's power and might (14:30,31), and lastly so that the people might believe in Moses, the man of God He had chosen to represent Him as their leader (14:31).

In the last two verses, 30 and 31, most translations miss out the two references these verses contain to the word 'hand', but I have included them here so that you can see how this works to emphasise the power and authority of God in the parting of the Red Sea. It says firstly; '*the Lord saved Israel that day from the hand of the Egyptians*' (14:30) and secondly, that Israel saw '*the hand of God against the Egyptians ...*' (14:31). In this way, the story highlights the spiritual power of God at work in this battle, for God's '*hand*' had won the victory over the '*hand*' of the Egyptians. God was more powerful than all the armies of Egypt, and the evidence of this was all around, with dead bodies littering the sea shore (14:30).

Remember, the people of Israel had been turned away from the easy northern route to Canaan because the Lord was concerned about whether they were able to face battle (13:18). Then, when led south, the people thought that they were being led into a trap and would soon be overcome by the Egyptians. Out of this seemingly impossible situation, however, the Lord created a stunning victory which brought the people freedom, but He chose to do this using one faithful person, a man who would not doubt Him, that is, Moses.

Going Deeper

The Bible study goes deeper to look at these issues:

- When did the Israelites and the Egyptians cross the Red Sea?
- The defeat of the Egyptians
- The meaning of the crossing of the Red Sea

Going Deeper

This famous event is well known to Jews and Christians alike. But how well known is it? People have argued for centuries over its details, and not least about the region of the world in which this took place. There are also other areas of great interest, for example, the discussion about what time of day the crossing of the Red Sea took place. If you glance back at yesterday's reading, you will find that just before Moses stretched out his hand to divide the waters, Scripture gives a description of what was happening 'at night' (14:20). As we will see, the timing of the crossing was quite significant!

When did the Israelites and the Egyptians cross the Red Sea?

There is no way we can be crystal clear about this, but there is enough evidence in the text to do some educated guesswork about the time of the crossing, and it is my opinion that it was not in the full light of day. The key references to time are as follows. Firstly, the passage just before our reading only makes sense if we assume that the pillar of cloud/fire split into two on the terrible night before the crossing. The pillar of fire (as usual for night time) remained at the front of the Israelite camp on the sea shore, but the pillar of cloud (usually a daytime feature) split away and formed a rear-guard with the Lord's angel (14:19) blocking the view between the Israelites and the Egyptian army and preventing contact (14:19,20). The next thing we hear (in today's reading) is that Moses 'stretched out his hand' to sweep back the waters 'all through the night' (14:21), and when they were divided, the Israelite began to cross! It certainly appears as if the Israelites crossed either at night, or at the latest, in the early part of the morning at first light, probably with the light of the pillar of fire (the night time presence of God – 13:21) still leading the way.

Another reason to reckon that the crossing took place either at night or at first light is because of the next reference to time, which comes in verse 24. This says that the Lord looked down from the fire and cloud to view the Egyptians following the Israelites into the sea 'during the morning watch' (14:24). This was the first watch of the day, beginning at first light and including dawn. Now, if the Egyptians were following the Israelites into the sea by sometime in the middle of this early watch, surely the Israelites had been crossing earlier, perhaps beginning their crossing before dawn. This is the most likely scenario, and in addition, the hazy dawn light together with the continued presence of the Lord in both fire and cloud (14:24) all contributes to the sense of confusion around the Egyptians, who pursued the Israelites into the sea; conditions which no seasoned soldier or military man would normally contemplate for chariots.

The defeat of the Egyptians

It is easy to lose sight of the sequence of events we are given for what the Egyptians did in pursuit of the Israelites. At some point, they gained information that the Israelites were escaping from them by going through the sea. This fact itself must have created some confusion because for religious people (which they were), this meant that something very significant was happening which they had not reckoned for. As far as they knew, the Israelites were trapped. They followed the Israelites blindly into the sea, only to find that the chariot wheels did not work (which is what the Hebrew text says), presumably clogged by the mud at the bottom of the sea. There is some debate about the size of the chariots, but there is some evidence that at the time, Egypt had three-men chariots of considerable weight, so Scripture's description fits these facts at least!

As the Egyptians followed, the Lord looked at them 'from the pillar of cloud and fire' and created panic amongst them (14:24). This resulted in the Egyptians' attempts to flee back to dry land. Whatever the people of Israel thought, they at least recognised that the Lord was 'fighting ... against Egypt!' The Lord then instructed Moses to raise his hand in authority again and draw back the sea to its normal depth, an action which meant that the Egyptians were overwhelmed in the sea and we may assume that those caught up were drowned; 'not one of them survived' (14:28).

It is most interesting that in verse 27, the text says that the sea returned to its normal depth 'at dawn', adding to our theory that the Israelite must have been crossing the sea during the night! This may not be the notion that most Christians have of the crossing of the Red Sea, but there is no doubt that it is thoroughly supported by the text.

The meaning of the crossing of the Red Sea

There has been much discussion of the facts of this event, and some have come up with amazing theories concerning possible explanations for the phenomenon. Amongst these are the idea that it was the result of extraordinary 'tsunami' type waves generated in the Mediterranean Sea by volcanic activity, and also the more rational idea that a hot east wind in the region dried up some marshy land sufficient for individual Israelites to cross, but not 600 heavy chariots! None of this is satisfactory or conclusive, and none has found universal acceptance. The Bible clearly presents this great event as a unique act of God by which He saved His people from death at the hand of the Egyptians. The whole of the story of Exodus swings about between death and life, ultimately showing that God is a God of life who saves those who put their trust in Him and obey Him. For example: Moses was saved from death as a baby (ch.2) but was banished from Egypt because he killed a man (2:11f.). Then the Lord sought to kill Moses, but he was saved through his wife's

actions (4:24f.). After this, plagues were inflicted on Egypt and Pharaoh culminated in the death of the first-born (ch.12), and new life was promised. Lastly, when the Israelites were given their freedom from slavery, they had to endure the deadly threat of battle (as here) before finally being granted the salvation and liberty for which they longed (today's passage). It is no wonder that the Passover meal and festival of Unleavened Bread contained powerful symbols of life and death (ch.13).

The abiding image of this great story is repeated towards the end of the story for emphasis; *'the Israelites walked through the sea on dry ground, with a wall of water on their right and on their left.'* Moreover, the word used in Hebrew for the 'wall' of water is one that is usually used to describe the huge thick walls of an ancient city. Scripture is quite clear; this was a miracle wrought by God.

The escape of Israel was a miracle which required faith, and that is where we find ourselves at the end of our passage today. When the people had crossed and saw the results of what had happened, and saw the dead on the seashore lying as after a battle, but not one which they had fought, they 'feared the Lord and believed in Him'. Moreover, they also believed in Moses (14:31), the servant of God who had acted in faith to do the Lord's will by signalling the dividing and the coming together of the sea. This is the first time that Scripture talks about the faith of the people of Israel as a whole, both in God and in their leader Moses, and we will see how this faith develops as the story of the Exodus now takes further dramatic leaps forward.

Application

The active power of God intervening in this world is described in this passage of Scripture as God's 'hand'. This term is used both of God himself (14:31) and also of Moses when acting in the faithful commissioned service of God (14:21, 26,27). It is the normal Christian experience to know something of God's will and power mediated through other people, and sometimes through direct divine intervention. When we experience that direct power of God, in whatever circumstances, that power touches us deeply and we testify to the presence of God whatever rational explanations others have of what we have experienced. For example, if I have felt God's healing power in my life, then I will testify to that fact, irrespective of whether there is other rational or scientific explanation for my healing.

Most Christians also experience the power of God mediated through human agents; preachers, leaders and evangelists, for example, but also through the humble service of those who do God's will. Moses was singularly obedient in the task of raising his hand to divide the waters and then close them up; if we compare the argumentative Moses of Exodus chapter 4 with the obedient Moses of chapter 14, we can see the difference, and it was right that now, at last, Moses' leadership was recognised by the people (14:31). In the light of this, we may say that only complete obedience to the living God and submission through service is acceptable as the qualities of those who aspire to Christian leadership of any form. Too often, Christian people follow a leader who is not acting in obedience to the Lord and also fail to challenge the presumptions and pretensions of people who come into Christian ministry who seek power for themselves rather than the ultimate and eternal purposes of God (often mixing up the two). The story of Moses from this point onwards in Scripture is a model of leadership which needs careful scrutiny, and should not be quickly dismissed because the man did God's will in an age long before the final revelation of God in Christ. We have much to learn from him.

Discipleship

Questions (for use in groups)

1. What pictures do you have in your mind of what it was like for the Israelites to cross the Red Sea? Does a study of this text change your pictures?
2. Discuss why it is that people today find it hard to read passages of Scripture in which people get killed in battle because of the work of the Lord.
3. How much faith was shown by the Israelites in crossing the Red Sea? How may we show such faith today?

Topics covered by this text

- *The miracle of the parting of the Red Sea*
- *The Lord's control of battle, and of life and death*
- *The salvation of Israel through the Red Sea*

Personal comments by author

It has been my experience that throughout life, the Lord has saved me from circumstances I was not able to handle myself. Moreover, it is only on looking back that I fully appreciate what the Lord has done. For this reason, I have frequently been able to take heart in the midst of troubled circumstances, and I remain confident that He will do the same again, even if I cannot perceive it. I am very grateful to the Lord that I came to terms with this aspect of the story of the crossing of the Red Sea at an early age, and as a consequence, I have been able to stand firm in the midst of trouble when I might otherwise have been weak. I know that many people find it hard to hold on to faith when life gets tough, but remain convinced that this story will help all who apply its truths.

Ideas for exploring discipleship

- *The people of Israel were trapped in an impossible situation until they were saved by the Lord through the Red Sea. Spend some time thinking about impossible situations from which you have been saved, and impossible situations from which you need to be saved now!*
- *Pray for any people you know who are trapped in situations from which it is almost impossible to escape, such as abusive marriage, or impossible work situations. Pray that the Lord will find new and miraculous ways to resolve these problems and bring peace, both for this life and for the next.*

Final Prayer

The wonders of Your love, Lord Jesus, are beyond our sight, beyond our experience, and beyond our understanding. Yet we know your love in amazing and miraculous ways, for You have touched us and we can never run away from the power of Your love. Keep us close, Lord Jesus, keep us close. AMEN
