

Prayer

Lord God, our heavenly Father, You have placed within us the faith we now demonstrate in our words, deed and actions. We are inspired by the stories of the life, death and resurrection of our Saviour Jesus. We are motivated by Him to preach good news, heal the sick, cast out demons and liberate captives. We are led by Him to love all those we meet, so that we may be fruitful in Your Kingdom. Thank You, Lord God: AMEN

Prayer Suggestions

Prayer ideas

When talking with others, enquire about their health and well-being. Later, pray briefly for the people you have met. Pray with them if it is appropriate

On-going prayers

- **Pray for the farming community** *Pray for those who regulate markets, pray for fairness and stability, and for godly management*
- *Pray for Poland after the death of its President in an air crash*
- *Give thanks for those who campaign for liberty and freedom*

Meditation

In a world full of beautiful sights and marvels of creation,
Save us, Lord, from blindness and insensitivity:

In a world full of air and water, earth and natural elements,
Save us, Lord, from polluting ourselves to death:

In a world full of plants and animals all dependent upon each other,
Save us, Lord, from brutality and destruction:

In a world full of trees, plants and a vast array of vegetation,
Save us, Lord, from exploiting this gift, for greed:

In a world full of people with vast potential for creativity and love,
Save us, Lord, from using others to meet our needs:

In a world full of the evidence of the mighty hand which made it'
Save us, Lord, from treating it as ours alone.

Bible passage - Exodus 14:5-20

⁵ When the king of Egypt was told that the people had fled, Pharaoh and his officials changed their minds about them, and said, 'What have we done by allowing Israel to leave our service?'

⁶ So Pharaoh prepared his chariot and took his army with him; ⁷ six hundred of the best chariots and all the other chariots of Egypt, with officers over all of them. ⁸ The LORD hardened the heart of Pharaoh king of Egypt and he pursued the Israelites as they left in triumph. ⁹ The Egyptians pursued them, the whole army of Pharaoh's horses and chariots and charioteers; and they overtook them while they were camped by the sea, by Pi-hahiroth, in front of Baal-zephon.

¹⁰ As Pharaoh approached, the Israelites looked back and saw the Egyptians coming nearer to them and were terrified, so they cried out to the LORD. ¹¹ They said to Moses, 'Was it because there were no graves in Egypt that you brought us into the desert to die? What have you done to us by bringing us out of Egypt? ¹² Did we not tell you this back in Egypt; "Leave us alone to serve the Egyptians"? It would be far better to serve the Egyptians than die in the wilderness!'

¹³ But Moses answered the people, 'Don't be afraid, take your stand, and see the salvation the

LORD will bring about for you today; for these Egyptians you see today you shall never see again. ¹⁴ The LORD will fight for you, and you only need to stop speaking!’

¹⁵ Then the LORD said to Moses, ‘Why do you call out to me? Tell the Israelites to go forward. ¹⁶ You must raise your staff and stretch your hand out over the sea and divide it, so that the Israelites may go through the sea on dry ground. ¹⁷ Then I will harden the hearts of the Egyptians so that they will go in after them; so I will obtain glory for myself over Pharaoh and all his army, his chariots, and his chariot drivers. ¹⁸ And the Egyptians shall know that I am the LORD, when I have gained glory for myself over Pharaoh, his chariots and his charioteers.’

¹⁹ The angel of God who had been moving ahead of the Israelite army changed position and went behind them, and the pillar of cloud also moved from in front of them and took its place behind them, ²⁰ coming between the Egyptian and the Israelite camp. There, the cloud and the darkness were the only light during the night, so one side did not come near the other all night long.

Bible Study

Review

The tension mounts as Israel are caught wandering in the desert by the Egyptian army! Our passage of Scripture describes the build up to the famous crossing of the Red Sea (which we will read tomorrow), but it bears all the hallmarks of a classic Old Testament story of a powerful intervention in world affairs by God. The nations of the world pursue their own interests (as represented here by the Egyptians) but fail to see what God is about to do. The people of Israel are equally ignorant of God’s will and desire to save them, but God’s servant, Moses, submits in obedience to the Lord God, and is used by Him to deliver His people.

It was not long before Pharaoh realised the enormity of his loss of face. In the aftermath of the havoc wreaked by the angel of death (12:29), Pharaoh had pleaded with Moses to take the people of Israel away from Egypt (12:31), but now his heart ‘hardened’, just as before (14:5). He realised that he had lost a substantial part of his labour force, and this would be a serious blow for his substantial building programme! He therefore consulted with his advisors and sent the army to track down the people of Israel almost as soon as they had managed to escape Egypt’s borders (14:7-9). Certainly, Pharaoh appears to have relished the chance to round up the apparently defenceless Israelites by assembling his best army (14:9). At that time Egypt was famous for its chariots and its horsemen; it was an army that would have feared no-one.

We can almost feel the tension as the story unfolds. The people soon realised they were being hunted, and they panicked. When faced by the visible power of Pharaoh’s army their initial response was to capitulate and surrender (14:10-12), surely they were far better off as slaves to the Egyptians than as playing the ‘mouse’ to the Egyptian army’s ‘cat’! They attacked Moses in anger (14:11), but he stood firm. In the face of this peril, Moses leadership was about to be tested to the limit. With Israel trapped with their backs to the Red Sea, Moses rebuked the people, he said, ‘don’t be afraid, take your stand, and see the salvation the Lord will bring about for you.’ (14:13).

God then outlined His plan of salvation to Moses (14:15-18), but before the plan was put into action, something extraordinary happened. Dramatically, the cloud that had been leading the way forward through the desert then moved into a protective position to shield the people of Israel. The cloud was a visible sign of God’s presence with His people, and this movement indicated His intent to save His people. It had the important effect of preventing the people from seeing the Egyptian army during the night before the crossing of the Red Sea (14:20).

We know what comes next, and this is the great story of Israel’s crossing of the Red Sea. We will read the this tomorrow, but as with all great stories, the drama of the moments before it happened are extraordinary. This is a story treasured and passed down from one generation to another over centuries. Along with the story of the Passover, this event defines the people of Israel, and it remains one of the greatest miracles of divine revelation and salvation found in the Bible.

Many people have attempted to work out how this miracle took place, as if it was possible to analyse an event in the past and reach a different conclusion to that of the people who have passed the story down! Whilst many theories about the crossing of the Red Sea have been produced, none of them account satisfactorily for all the details of the story found in Scripture, and it is only when we read the story with faith that we can appreciate the full measure of the power displayed by God in this extraordinary event. It was

God's intent to show the world His own power and might, not merely in releasing the Israelites, but in the comprehensive defeat of Pharaoh. God alone would save His people!

Going Deeper

The Bible study goes deeper to look at these issues:

- The pursuit of Israel by the Egyptians
- Israel's complaints about God and Moses
- The Lord's instructions to Moses and the moving of the cloud.

Going Deeper

There are some surprises for us within this part of the story which challenge some of our ideas about the crossing of the Red Sea; but when we examine it closely, the story makes a great deal more sense than we might imagine. It was certainly a miracle, but it was carefully designed by God for the protection of His people as well as the defeat of the Egyptians.

The pursuit of Israel by the Egyptians

Why did Pharaoh change his mind yet again about letting the Israelites go? Scripture does give us the answer to this, although we read it and think that we have heard it all before; 'the Lord hardened the heart of Pharaoh king of Egypt ...' (14:8). What happens throughout the stories of the plagues is this; Pharaoh slowly moved towards giving permission for the Israelites to leave, but then changed his mind because the Lord had 'hardened his heart'. In the final plague, Pharaoh did indeed give permission for the Israelites to go, and pleaded with Moses to leave, but as someone who did not fear God, he was not capable of changing his basic instincts and the hardness of his heart, put there by God. Pharaoh 'changed his mind' simply because he was not the person who was saved by God by the Exodus and he continued to be a stubborn man; he had changed his mind but not his heart. It is worth remembering this, because throughout the Old Testament, unrepentant stubbornness becomes a theme which represents opposition to God and His ways. Isaiah, for example, is told by the Lord that the people of Israel would become stubborn and unresponsive to God's work (Isaiah 6:10,11). Then, in the work of the prophets generally, the stubbornness of God's people becomes the backdrop against which the great prophecies of the Messiah are set. Jeremiah, for example, chastises the people for their stubbornness (5:23; 16:12; 23:17) and looks forward to a time when God would bring a new covenant written on hearts and not on stone (31:33f.).

One additional hint is provided by Scripture which may have something to do with Pharaoh's response, and it is found at the end of verse 8; '... he pursued the Israelites as they left in triumph'. The Hebrew expression at the end means something like this 'with their hands held high', and we reasonably assume that this was an indication of triumph and victory. When the Israelites first left, they had done so in haste after Pharaoh bid them depart, and there must have been a sense of elation at finally being freed from bondage (12:37f.). Perhaps their victory celebrations were a bit too much for Pharaoh to stomach!

Israel's complaints about God and Moses

Once the Egyptian army had been assembled to track the Israelites, they quickly followed them on their changed course as far as the encampment by the sea 'in front of Baal-Zephon' (14:1,9). It is possible that the army came within sight one evening, for much of what happens next (see later 14:) does so at night. The complaints then arose as the Israelites faced the night, knowing that in the morning they would be shown no mercy; they certainly anticipated being killed (14:11). We can sympathise with the plight of the Israelites, but should think carefully about what they said. They would rather live in slavery with an earthly authoritarian ruler than risk trusting all to the mercy of God, even when He was evidently in the middle of doing amazing and miraculous acts to save them!

Moses' threefold answer was firstly, 'don't be afraid'; secondly, 'take your stand'; and thirdly 'see the salvation ...' (14:13). This was typically robust and straightforward spiritual advice. Fear has always been a proper response to danger, but it has never been a good guide for what to do when faced with danger. The second piece of advice to 'take your stand' is sometimes translated as 'stand still' or 'stand firm', but the idea in Hebrew was of a military unit preparing to defend themselves from a position of strength, like a group of soldiers holding an impregnable position which they could not lose if they were disciplined. This was the heart of Moses' call to the Israelites, for he saw that with the activity of the Lord all around them, they could not lose despite the apparent problems. Moses' last appeal was for the Israelites to keep their eyes on what God was doing rather than what the enemy was doing. They should have their eyes on God's salvation which was unfolding around them in power and wonder, not the apparent problems of the presence of the Egyptian army.

Moses' words to the Israelites did not stop there, however. He went on (14:14) to affirm to the Israelites that the Lord their God who had already brought them out of Egypt after an unprecedented miracle, would fight for them! All they had to do was 'stop speaking'! Again, my translation of this passage is a little different from most Bibles, which have 'keep still' or 'be silent'; however, the Hebrew clearly means 'stop speaking', and it is likely that Moses was telling the Israelites in no uncertain terms that they should stop their complaining; the time for words was over!

The Lord's instructions to Moses and the moving of the cloud

As in so many of the stories within Exodus, we hear about the Lord telling Moses what to do before he did it (14:15-18), which was a common feature of storytelling in ancient Israel. Here, Moses was told in advance that he should hold out his hand over the Red Sea to divide it and therefore provide a path for the Israelites through the water on dry ground. We will study this in more depth tomorrow, but here, the Lord gives more emphasis to the explanation of why this would happen than to the description of what Moses had to do. The salvation of the Israelite people was only part of the reason why God wanted to have victory over the Egyptian army. The main reason mentioned here was so that God would gain 'glory' for Himself. This means that God would be credited by people in other regions of the world for achieving this victory. It was important for God's work in the world not just to save His people but also be seen to be alive and active in the world by other peoples and nations.

The last piece of preparatory action taken by the Lord is a mysterious manoeuvre to protect the people (14:19-20). The Hebrew of this passage is a little bewildering, but it does not take too much thought about what was happening in the story to piece it together. Because the people were frightened, it was evening and the night was drawing in (see the references to darkness and the night in verse 20 onwards), the pillar of cloud in front of the Israelites would be expected to turn to a pillar of fire (as in 13:21,22), representing the presence of God Himself. However, God took up a new formation of protection around Israel, defending their rear and crucially, blocking their view of the Egyptian army behind them, and preventing the Egyptians seeing them.

What happened was this. The 'angel of God' (another way of saying 'God's messenger') went to the rear of the Israelites to protect them (14:19), and whereas we may assume that as night came, the pillar of fire took up its place at the front of the camp as expected, it appears to have split, with the cloud going to the back and forming a barrier of 'cloud and darkness' (14:20) to the rear. This meant that the front of the Israelite camp would have been lit by the glow of the pillar of fire, their rear only had the light of this mysterious 'cloud and darkness', and this meant, as verse 2 says 'one side did not come near the other all night long!' God was protecting His people.

Application

This text has much to offer, and amongst this is good advice about how to handle ourselves when we are caught up in the dramatic events of salvation and spiritual warfare. Firstly, the spiritual warfare described in this passage is not separate from God's work of salvation; God, it is one and the same thing. The liberation of God's people of Israel had to be gained through warfare, and much as we dislike this, salvation today will often have to be fought for. Our battle, of course, is a spiritual battle rather than a physical one, but it is no less daunting.

The spiritual battles we face today are a consequence of all the evils we find in our own world, especially those that seek to prevent people from coming to faith in Christ and finding their salvation. We can list at least materialism and secularism as harbouring such evils, but we need to be alert to what is right and wrong in our world if we are to discern those specific evils against which we must fight if our own witness to Christ is to be effective. It is only when the whole church of God realises that salvation and spiritual warfare are one and the same that we will discover the proper meaning of them both. Spiritual warfare, according to this text, is as much God's warfare rather as ours, and He wins battles against evil (sometimes through us) in order to bring about the salvation of individual people.

In addition, we have a responsibility as God's people to stand firm in our faith, and take our stance with Moses to keep watching the Lord rather than be distracted by how the enemy is behaving. To be sidetracked by our enemy is a sure recipe for disaster. Perhaps the Lord also needs us to stop our complaining at times, for the Lord had to speak sharply about this to the Israelites through Moses.

Finally, we should not forget that part of the reason for God's work in the world is not simply to bring about our own salvation. Sometimes God does things, as here, to show His power and glory in the world. In this way, others see something of God's power and majesty, and only subsequently do they turn to Him.

Discipleship

Questions *(for use in groups)*

1. Discuss in your group how you might react to the circumstances faced by the Israelites when overtaken by the army of Pharaoh.
2. How easy is it to follow good advice in the midst of a critical situation? Why do people sometimes lose faith in the midst of a crisis?
3. Imagine the picture painted in verses 19 and 20. Read through the verses and draw a map of how you imagine the scene and discuss what it means.

Topics covered by this text

- *The pursuit of Israel through the desert by Pharaoh's army*
- *Panic in the Israelites camp and the leadership of Moses*
- *The work of God to bring about salvation and deliverance*

Personal comments by author

Many people are afraid of what is called spiritual warfare. This is unfortunate because the terminology puts people off what it really means. Spiritual warfare is a glamorous term but it means fighting evil, and most of us do this in one way or another. In this light, the crossing of the Red Sea is a story that helps us appreciate how dependent we are upon the Lord for this. Personally, I have found that it is presumptuous of me to assume that I have to fight battles myself. Rather, as I come across evil, my task is to join in what the Lord is already doing to fight that evil; He knows about it, and I need to join Him.

Ideas for exploring discipleship

- *Think carefully about your own circumstances at the moment, and ask yourself whether you are facing any particular evil at the moment, in the home, in the workplace or in any other part of your life. How do you intend to fight it? In prayer, ask the Lord to help you.*
- *Find a friend and discuss the whole issue of spiritual warfare. Try to find out what other people think about this from a number of different perspectives, and weigh up what they have to say against what you believe Scripture says.*

Final Prayer

Dear Lord Jesus, You know my life better than I do. You understand the things I fail to see and You know my heart when things seem too complicated for me. Guide my life in all that is good true and lovely, I pray, so that I might give glory to You in everything I do, from now until eternity. AMEN
