

The Red Sea
Exodus 14
Week 1

Opening

For leaders of virtual or hybrid groups:

Be sure to hop onto the video call a bit early so group members aren't anxiously, awkwardly waiting. Remember you are the host, so just as if you were welcoming folks into your home, use these first few moments to welcome each participant by name. It means a lot to acknowledge everyone on the call and confirm you can see and hear them. If there are new folks joining your group, be sure to introduce them as well.

Ask if anyone would like to open in prayer. They can pray on their own or use the prayer printed below. It also might be a good idea to reach out to a group member prior to your meeting and ask them ahead of time if they'd be willing to open in prayer. That's a great way to encourage participation without putting anyone on the spot.

Gracious God, as we come together to place our lives in front of your Holy Word, we pray that you would give us wisdom and understanding. May we approach this sacred text with humility, curiosity, expectancy and love. Be among us and in our conversation through the power of your Holy Spirit. We pray in the name of the one to whom this whole story points, Jesus the Christ, amen.

Depending on time constraints you may want to take a bit of extra time to check in with folks and see how they're doing. You could also wait and do this at the end of the session before closing in prayer.

Check-in question

Each week, give an opportunity for folks to either respond to the check-in question below or, if they'd rather, share something that came up for them as they were reading the other texts assigned for the Big Read this week.

Have you ever lived out the adage "the grass is always greener on the other side"? (For example: perhaps you thought leaving a job and going to another company would be more satisfying, or moving to another house or city etc.)

Background

The crossing of the Red Sea brings us to the culmination of the Exodus story. Moses has answered God's call to return to Egypt and confront Pharaoh in his abuse of the Israelites and urge him to let them go. An intense interaction between Pharaoh, God and Moses ensues through the ten plagues and the Passover. Pharaoh relents and releases the Israelites but ultimately goes back on his word. Moses and the people are forced to rely on God alone to escape Pharaoh's grasp.

The miracle of the Red Sea has cosmological overtones. The sea is prominent in many ancient creation stories, not only the Bible, but also in creation stories of ancient Israel's neighbors. Not surprisingly, there are echoes of Genesis 1 in Exodus 14. The "strong east wind" of Exodus 14:21 uses the same Hebrew noun (*ruach*) as that in Genesis 1:2: "And the Spirit (*ruach*) of God was moving over the face of the waters." In addition, Exodus 14:21 describes the waters as "divided" so that the Israelites might march over on dry land. Genesis 1:6 describes the separation of the waters, those above from those below (compare Genesis 1:9). There can be no question that the text of Exodus 14 intends the readers to understand that Yahweh, the God of Israel, is the creator of the heavens and the earth, and that all others gods are no gods at all.

It is clear from the interest the Red Sea miracle has aroused in Christians that the theology of Exodus 14 is a statement to the church and to individual Christians about the freedom that God has won for us from those forces over which we have little or no control: sin, disease, loneliness, pain and death.

Jesus is a new Moses, leading the way for God's people to a new mode of existence. He is a new Moses, leading God's people to a new chosen land. In Hebrews 3:1-6, Moses and Christ are compared as deliverers. The writer here employs a rather difficult analogy to explain the superiority of Christ over Moses. Jesus is a new and better Moses. The reasons for this assertion are clarified in what follows (Heb. 4:1-13). It is through Christ (the new Moses) that we as the church (the new Israel) gain entrance into heaven (the new Promised Land). Christ has come to complete what the first Moses could not do and what Joshua had to do in his stead: not only deliver the people out of Egypt but bring them into Canaan.

The startling statement that Paul makes in 1 Corinthians 10:4 that the real liberator of Pharaoh's slaves was Christ is not due to a slip of the pen, or to a misunderstanding concerning chronology, or a romanticized view of life. Paul declares that the miracle of the Red Sea was a prelude to the miracle of the open tomb, and that the God who raised Jesus from the dead is the same God who held the waters at bay for the Israelites. Just as the Red Sea waters become emblematic of Christian baptism, so the miracle of the Red Sea points to the continuing miracle of God's redemptive love in Jesus Christ, a love that continues to work its wonder today.¹

v.10 This quick, almost embarrassing mood change by the Israelites is the first installment of the grumbling theme that will characterize much of Israel's behavior through the desert period

¹Newsome, James D. *Interpretation Bible Studies: Exodus*. Geneva Press, 1998.

to follow. The people's specific outcry is also startling. Apparently they were quite happy as slaves in Egypt, and their blindness to God's might leads them to think of only two options: slavery in Egypt or death in the desert (v. 12). This hyperbolic response is more of a temper tantrum than a cry for help. At the first sight of trouble, they are willing to march straight back to Egypt ignoring the mighty acts of God that have brought them out in the first place. With Pharaoh in hot pursuit, they do not give a second thought to the promise God made to the patriarchs (Abraham, Isaac and Jacob). They still have not learned that God's purpose for bringing them out of Egypt is not simply to save *them*, but to maintain his covenant to tie to *all* his people, past, present, and future. They have still not learned that *their* circumstances are not the final standard on which to view the work of God.²

v. 16 as we have seen repeatedly, the plagues are God's employing the forces of creation against Pharaoh and his people. They are reversals of creation, that is, what was done in Genesis 1 is undone in the plagues. The parting of the water at Moses' command is the ultimate creation reversal. In Genesis 1:9, the seas *come together* and separate themselves from the dry land. Here, the seas are *split open* to expose the land beneath.

v. 18 it may be difficult for people living in the modern world to understand how God can be "glorified" by killing his enemies, but this sentiment should not obscure what is clearly the case here. In fact, passages such as this have led many to think of the God of the Old Testament as a God of "wrath" while the God of the New Testament is a God of grace and love. Of course, even a cursory knowledge of both Testaments quickly dissolves such a view, since there is plenty of grace in the Old Testament, even toward the enemies of God (e.g., Isaiah 19:16-25), and a good bit of wrath in the New Testament (e.g., Matt. 8:12; Rev. 14:14-20), God is not as tame as we would like him to be.

Read Exodus 14

*Make it a point over the course of this series to read from a few different translations. Encourage those who may be reading from a different translation to share any differences they see.

Initial Reactions

1. What from this story confuses, inspires, or resonates with you? What questions or curiosities do you have about this passage?
2. What does this story tell us about God? What does this story tell us about humanity?
3. Were there any images, stories or insights that stuck out to you from Sunday's sermon?

Going Deeper

4. Why does God rescue his people? What's the point?

²Enns, Peter. *The NIV Application Commentary: Exodus*. Zondervan, 2000.

5. How is Israel's freedom from captivity by following God like obtaining freedom from captivity to sin today?
6. An abiding feature of this story is the presence of God with the Israelites, calling to mind the portrayal of Jesus as Emmanuel (God with us) in Matthew's Gospel. What are some of the expressions of God's presence in this story?
7. The Israelites complain to Moses about leaving Egypt. In fact, while they are complaining, God is about to deliver them. Moses gave the Israelites five affirmations just before leading them across the sea. What does Moses say to the people? In what ways can those affirmations speak to us today?
8. The strong images of ruach (wind or spirit) and water reverberate throughout this story. The story of Jesus' baptism involves water and spirit as well. What are ways baptism is like the Red Sea miracle?

So What Questions

As you move into the "so what" questions, keep this excerpt from Pete Enns' commentary in mind:

"The significance of the Exodus for us is not found in what we do with it, but in what God has done for us already in Christ. We have missed the theological point of the story if we reduce its grand theological message to a number of moral lessons, such as "Be faithful in a tight fix" or "Don't fear tough times, just 'be still' and let God take care of you." Of course, these are good things to remember (and difficult to do!), but the question here is whether the point of the Exodus story is to teach us these things. I think not. The Exodus story is not a pep talk for when we go through trying circumstances, to teach us that God will win our battles for us. Rather, if anything, it is a pep talk to remind us that God has won the battle. All of our daily battles, which are real and matter to God, should be seen in this overarching context."³

9. Have you ever been at a point in your life when you felt like you had a Red Sea in front of you and an army behind you? Describe that time.
10. The Israelites were fearful and wanted to go back to what they knew – slavery. Are there things you need to leave behind, or comfort zones you need to push through, to strengthen your journey with God?

Closing

Check in if you haven't already done so and ask for any prayer requests. Encourage group members to write down these requests and follow up as necessary. Close with prayer.

³Enns, Peter. *The NIV Application Commentary: Exodus*. Zondervan, 2000