

## ***God Triumphs at the Sea***

Exodus 13:17-14:31

Fall Old Testament Sermon Series on Exodus

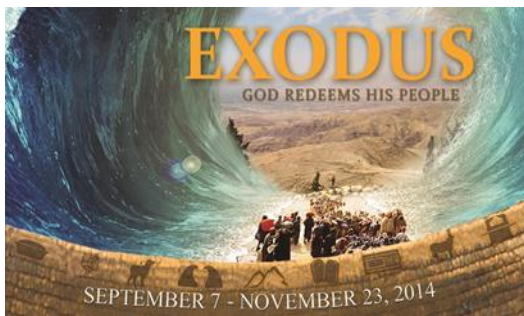
Kenwood Baptist Church

Pastor David Palmer

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**TEXTS:** Exodus 13:17-14:31

We continue this morning with our series on the Exodus. The Exodus is the center of gravity of the Old Testament, and it is this subject that occupies us this morning. It is no wonder that



Paul's teacher Gamaliel said in Mishnah, *Pesahim*, 9.5: "In every generation, a person must regard themselves as if they themselves came forth out of Egypt, as it is written 'and you shall tell your son in that day because of that which the Lord did for me when I came out of Egypt.' (Exodus 13:8)" Brevard Childs, professor at Yale University said: "It is incumbent upon each generation

to study the Exodus afresh, to have the contemporary situation of the church addressed by its word, and to anticipate a fresh appropriation of its message through the work of God's Holy Spirit."

This morning, we look to the climactic moment when God triumphs at the sea. Christoph Barth, the son of Karl Barth, says: "The Exodus is of first importance. It is that article of faith that united and inspired the people of God. The God in whom Israel believes is the Lord who brought us out of Egypt, and it is not by chance that this phrase occurs 120 times in the Bible. There is no other statement about who the Lord is mentioned more frequently than this moment. It is this moment, the freedom from Egypt, where God establishes the ground on which His people stand, and through this moment, Israel comes into being as God's very own people." He says: "The Exodus, then, undeniably enjoys priority. It influences the way in which the Old Testament witnesses to all other great deeds of God, in all of which we find a parallel intention, a similar note, and a common aim." God's triumph at the sea, this great victory at these waters, prepares us to see the Lord and to respond to Him with awe and with faith. That is my hope this morning, that we would see the Lord's very present and active hand in this passage, and that we, like Israel of old, would respond with awe and with faith.



Let's follow the narrative together. In Exodus 13:17 we read:

*"When Pharaoh let the people go, **God did not lead them** on the road through the Philistine country, though that was shorter. For God said, 'If they face war, they might change their minds and return to Egypt.'"*

I want you to notice first of all how God is personally present in this scene, guiding every step. You recall from last week that the people came out from Egypt under the blood of the Passover lamb. They journeyed out from Ramses to Succoth. We read then that God did not lead them on the road through the Philistine country, though that was shorter, for God said: *"If they face war, they might change their minds and returned to Egypt."* When Israel starts to exit Egypt, they move out from Pharaoh's domain, and the text says that God is at the head of the column. He does not lead them by the short road to the land of promise. If we pull up in our mind's eye

and recall the geography of this region, Israel has left the Nile Delta, that green, lush area close by the sea. They are headed towards the land that God promised. The short way is the way straight by the Mediterranean Sea. The Egyptians call this *The Way of Horus*. Other ancient texts refer to this as *The Way of the Philistines*. Thutmose III makes this journey in seven days. It's the quick route to the land of promise, and yet God knows that He has more to teach His people about who He is and who He has



called them to be. So, He does not take them by this short road. He also knows that they might panic if they go this way, because *The Way of Horus* is lined with Egyptian fortresses. Israel, unarmed, would be decimated on their way. Isn't it good that the Bible says that God will not give you more than you can handle? He will not take you unarmed past a wave of Egyptian forts the moment after you have placed your trust in Him. So, we read that God leads the people south, around by the wilderness or desert road, towards the Red Sea. The Hebrew actually says not the *Red Sea* but the *Sea of Reeds*. It is the *Septuagint* or the Greek translation of the Old Testament that renders this as the *Red Sea*. Scholars are divided on whether in antiquity the Gulf of Suez actually joined up with the intercoastal lakes in between. In antiquity, those intercoastal lakes are filled with reeds. God knows what He is doing with us. He leads the people, and He brings them down towards this Sea of Reeds, and they are leaving out of Egypt. The NIV obscures this a little bit and says they are leaving armed for battle. The text, in fact, says that they are leaving in groups of 50. It is actually pretty important to me that they are not armed for battle, because the Lord is the Warrior of this text. They leave in groups of 50. In other words, they leave in an organized way. They leave with their arms raised high in praise to God, as we will see. They journey south, and we read in Exodus 13:19:

*“Moses took the bones of Joseph with him because Joseph had made the sons of Israel swear an oath. He had said, ‘God will surely come to your aid, and then you must carry my bones up with you from this place.’”*

This is the final word of Genesis 50, and in a very touching scene, Moses brings the bones of Joseph with them.

The Israelites head towards the southern area, and we read in Exodus 13:21 that God is with them in a personal and dramatic invisible way:

*“By day the LORD went ahead of them in a pillar of cloud to guide them on their way and by night in a pillar of fire to give them light, so that they could travel by day or night.”*

Most scholars think that this is one and the same thing, that it is visible in the daytime by its cloud nature and at night by the fire. This is not just a cloud. This is the Bible's language of talking about the very personal presence of the living God. This is what will overwhelm Mount Sinai in just a few chapters: God's personal, real presence felt, perceived, seen, guiding the people at each step. I love the line in Exodus 13:22 that says:

*“Neither the pillar of cloud by day nor the pillar of fire by night left its place in front of the people.”*

God says in Deuteronomy 31:8:

*“It is the LORD who goes before you. He will be with you; He will not leave you or forsake you. Do not fear or be dismayed.”*

He says in Joshua 1:5:

*“No man shall be able to stand before you all the days of your life. Just as I was with Moses, so I will be with you. I will not leave you or forsake you.”*

In Jesus' last words in Matthew 28:20 He says:

*“And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”*

This is what it means to have God as our Covenant God. It is not just an abstract idea; it is the very real, personal, presence of God dwelling with us, guiding our every step. We see that God knows what we can handle. We see that God knows how to protect us. We see that God has intentions for us, and so we read, somewhat surprisingly, in Exodus 14:1-2:

*“Then the LORD said to Moses, ‘Tell the Israelites to turn back and encamp near Pi Hahiroth, between Migdol and the sea. They are to encamp by the sea, directly opposite Baal Zephon.’”*

This is one of the most alarming verses of the Old Testament. Israel has left Egypt; God has

watched over them with a vigil at night; they have come out in orderly progression, groups of 50; they are standing at the edge of the wilderness; they are poised at the boundary line of Egypt, ready to depart forever; and God tells them to turn around! This might be one of those moments when you might think we need to have an emergency meeting. Moses has certainly misheard God. Freedom is this way, and now He is telling them to turn around. He tells them very specifically to turn around, turn back, and camp near Pi Hahiroth, which is the mouth of the canal between Migdol and the sea. God tells the people to turn around and to pin themselves in against the sea.

Scholars debate the route of the Exodus. Some think it is a northern route; some a middle; some a southern route. That is not of ultimate concern, but what matters is that Israel had



made it, and God tells them to turn back. Whether they turned back into the North or turned back into the South, or whether the crossing then ends up being at Lake Timna or Lake Ballah or the tip of the Gulf of Suez, it doesn't really ultimately matter to me. What does matter is that God tells the people to turn around, and He says in Exodus 14:4:

*“But I will gain glory for Myself.”*

God knows exactly what He is doing with us. He leads the people to be pinned in that the edge of the sea. He says in Exodus 14:3:

*“Pharaoh will think, ‘The Israelites are wandering around the land in confusion, hemmed in by the desert.’”*

Pharaoh will see Israel wandering around in confusion, pinned in by the wilderness, lost and confused. So, we read in Exodus 14:6-7:

*“So he had his chariot made ready and took his army with him. He took six hundred of the best chariots, along with all the other chariots of Egypt, with officers over all of them.”*

Pharaoh went in pursuit, with his hardened heart.

Chariots were a new invention. They were like the B-1 bombers of the New Kingdom in ancient Egypt. They were pretty awesome. This is a picture of just one of Pharaoh’s high quality chariots in the British Museum today. I would love to go for a ride on this. There were 600 chosen



chariots, and the chariots were not armed with knives. That comes later and was an innovation during the Persian period. The Egyptian chariots are mobile strike forces for shooting arrows. Below is an image of one of King Tut's chariots, and we see King Tut in his chariot. He has a blue crown of war; over him is the vulture and the cobra, the signs of upper and lower Egypt. As he is riding in his chariot, his bow is stretched back in a posture of war. The hieroglyphs just inside and above his arm say: "He who has a mighty, outstretched arm." The most grisly part of this scene, though, is the



bottom. As you see, the Pharaoh is riding over the bodies of his enemies, crushing and killing them. Some of them are pierced with arrows already; others are just being driven over. At the bottom of the frame, you see the dogs of war going out along with Pharaoh and eating

the heads of his enemies. This is the standard depiction of the might of Pharaoh. Thus, it is no small understatement in Exodus 14:10 when we read:

*"As Pharaoh approached, the Israelites looked up, and there were the Egyptians, marching after them. They were terrified and cried out to the LORD."*

Then they did what people do when they're afraid or nervous. This often happens when you do public speaking: your rate of speech increases dramatically; you practice the speech at home and it is an eight-minute speech, and then you get up to give it in front of people, it turns into a four-minute speech. I imagine the Israelites speaking in this type of tone. They see Pharaoh driving towards them with 600 chariots, the army of Egypt, and they start speaking very quickly what we read in Exodus 14:11-12:

*"Was it because there were no graves in Egypt that you brought us to the desert to die? What have you done to us by bringing us out of Egypt? Didn't we say to you in Egypt, 'Leave us alone; let us serve the Egyptians'? It would have been better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die in the desert!"*

How true it is for us at times that we prefer the security of slavery and are really unwilling to

step into the freedom to which God is calling us and bringing us. The people are panicked for a right cause: here comes Pharaoh's army dashing towards them. But Moses speaks and says in Exodus 14:13:

*"Do not be afraid. Stand firm and you will see the deliverance the LORD will bring you today. The Egyptians you see today you will never see again. The LORD will fight for you; you need only to be still."*

"Stand firm and just watch what God will do for you." He says, "The Lord, He will fight for you; you have only to be still or be quiet. Just watch the triumph of God." The Lord then triumphs at the sea and gains eternal and everlasting glory for Himself. The Lord tells Moses in Exodus 14:16:

*"Raise your staff and stretch out your hand."*

This is a symbol of rule. God tells him that He will move with His own personal presence. We read in Exodus 14:19-20:

*"Then the angel of God, who had been traveling in front of Israel's army, withdrew and went behind them. The pillar of cloud also moved from in front and stood behind them, coming between the armies of Egypt and Israel."*

God positions Himself like a mighty warrior. Moses stretches out his hand, and we read that God divides the waters in an act similar to Genesis 1, where the waters are divided, and the dry land appears. Scholars wonder if this happens through a powerful blowing of the winds that still happens in this part of the world today, where the water can be blown aside and dry land can emerge. Napoleon I, in his campaigns in Egypt, experienced this. He says: "We came through on dry land, and a few hours later, when the wind shifted, the whole area was a floodplain." It doesn't matter to me if it's 30 feet high walls of water; it doesn't matter if it's a phenomenon were God blows and dry land appears in this region. What does matter is that ancient Israel saw the hand of God create a path for her to walk on in the midst of the waters. If 30 feet high walls of water strains your powers of imagination, then imagine that the sea is blown with shallower waters and then comes back, and strain the powers of your imagination on how God drowns an army in three feet of water. Either you have a big miracle at the front or a big miracle at the end. It doesn't really matter to me. What matters is that the hand of God reaches out to save. What matters is that God makes a way, and you and I are told to stand and see the salvation that God works for us.

What is our role in this great moment? Our role is to watch, and then we have the great privilege of just walking. We walk through on dry ground, and God separates the waters. The people pass through on dry ground. All through the night, God watches over the exiting of His people, and in the morning, He looks down from the pillar of fire and covers the Egyptian army

with these very same waters. Can you imagine being there? This would be a moment to long to have been there. What would you have done if you had stood on the other side of the sea and the waters came back over, and you realized that God was not bringing you into freedom by sleight-of-hand, and you realized that God was making a permanent and definitive break between your past and your present, and that He was saying with a mighty outstretched arm” “You are Mine forever”? What would you have done? It strains the limits of language, and when we reach the edge of language, the only option we really have is to burst into poetry, to burst into song. That's what God's people do. When they stood on the other side of the sea, they burst into song. We read in Exodus 15:1:

*“Then Moses and the people of Israel sang this song to the LORD, saying, ‘I will sing to the LORD, for He has triumphed gloriously; the horse and his rider He has thrown into the sea.’”(RSV)*

The Lord has triumphed and made a way through the sea. Exodus 15 relates this moment, and it makes a permanent impression on God's people. Exodus 15 is given a special treatment in the transmission of the Bible itself. It is written differently from any other passage in the entire Bible. It is written with special ancient instructions which say: “Write the lines so that they recall the brick makers’ trade during 400 years of slavery. Set the text like bricks, and yet divide them.” You can see the text of Exodus 15 in this ancient Hebrew scroll. The text is set like bricks, divided. So God's people walk through in the middle of the dry land.



Exodus 15 is prayed and read every single morning in a traditional synagogue service; every morning this passage is read. I was thrilled to go to the children's wing at Kenwood where we have a small Hebrew scroll in the display window. I was thinking, “I really hope that they've arranged this in the traditional way.” I scrolled through and found Exodus 15, and I was thrilled. It is laid out in the traditional manner with the text divided: “They walked through on the dry ground.” Every day we remember God's triumph at the sea. Israel comes to believe in Him, to place their trust in Him in the wake of His great mighty power to save. The confession of Exodus 15:11 is:

*“Who among the gods is like You, O LORD? Who is like You-- majestic in holiness, awesome in glory, working wonders?”*

The song of Exodus 15 becomes one of the eternal songs for God's people. When we sing: “Great and marvelous are Your deeds, O Lord God Almighty,” we are preparing for eternity. Revelation 15 says that the redeemed multitude in glory sings the song of Moses and the song of the Lamb: “Who is like You, O Lord God Almighty?”

Preparing for this passage, I felt my heart was going to burst. This scene has just filled my heart with an unending praise. I love what God did here! The God with this power, this commitment to be with you, this is the God we worship. When we groan over the unrighteousness and injustice in the world, this is the what God says: "I will set every wrong to right, just stand and see what I will do for you. I will reach out My mighty hand, and I will make a way for you. Just place your trust in Me, and I will go out in front of you, and I will be behind you, and I will never leave you, and I will never forsake you." This is why the Exodus is so important. This is why the Bible is filled with remembrances. This is why the traditional liturgy of the daily morning prayer includes this passage: "Who is like the Lord?" No one! No one! It is a decisive line. You can't ever go back to your old life after this moment. You have to live in light of the redemption that God has accomplished; you have to.

Now the real adventure begins: freedom of following God; and He is going to lead us to worship together at the mountain. He is going to speak to us His will and His Word, and we will always have within us: "Who is like the Lord? No one!" We will always have this concrete picture of what it means to have the living God fight on our behalf. God triumphs at the sea. Whom shall we fear this morning? Let's pray.

O Lord, I want to thank You for holding my heart intact. I thank You for Your great triumph and that there really is none like You. I pray, Father, for any of us here who are gripped by fear, that they would hear Your voice saying: "Do not be afraid; stand firm, and see what I will do for you." I pray, Father, for those here who are tempted to run back to Egypt, to the false security of the slave's life, to the predictable routine. I pray, Father, that You would set us free to follow You. I pray, Father, that You would draw us close to You, and that You would make it our confession as a people to lift our hands and our voice, to lift up Your name, to answer the question: "Who is there like You?" with a faith-filled heart resounding: "There is none like the Lord!" We praise You, Lord God Almighty, and we worship You together as a redeemed people.

Amen.