

**Altavista Presbyterian Church
Rev. Eduardo Soto, Jr.**

**“God’s Protection”
Exodus 14:19-25
Exodus 14:26-31**

**Twenty-Fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time
September 17, 2017**

Exodus 14:19-25

Then the angel of God who was going before the host of Israel moved and went behind them, and the pillar of cloud moved from before them and stood behind them, coming between the host of Egypt and the host of Israel. And there was the cloud and the darkness. And it lit up the night without one coming near the other all night.

Then Moses stretched out his hand over the sea, and the Lord drove the sea back by a strong east wind all night and made the sea dry land, and the waters were divided. And the people of Israel went into the midst of the sea on dry ground, the waters being a wall to them on their right hand and on their left. The Egyptians pursued and went in after them into the midst of the sea, all Pharaoh's horses, his chariots, and his horsemen. And in the morning watch the Lord in the pillar of fire and of cloud looked down on the Egyptian forces and threw the Egyptian forces into a panic, clogging their chariot wheels so that they drove heavily. And the Egyptians said, "Let us flee from before Israel, for the Lord fights for them against the Egyptians."

Exodus 14:26-31

Then the Lord said to Moses, "Stretch out your hand over the sea, that the water may come back upon the Egyptians, upon their chariots, and upon their horsemen." So Moses stretched out his hand over the sea, and the sea returned to its normal course when the morning appeared. And as the Egyptians fled into it, the Lord threw the Egyptians into the midst of the sea. The waters returned and covered the chariots and the horsemen; of all the host of Pharaoh that had followed them into the sea, not one of them remained. But the people of Israel walked on dry ground through the sea, the waters being a wall to them on their right hand and on their left.

Thus the Lord saved Israel that day from the hand of the Egyptians, and Israel saw the Egyptians dead on the seashore. Israel saw the great power that the Lord used against the Egyptians, so the people feared the Lord, and they believed in the Lord and in his servant Moses.

"God's Protection"

The grass withers and the flower fades, but the Word of the Lord remains forever. Friends, this is the Word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be pleasing and acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

For the past couple of weeks we've been journeying on a miniseries through the Book of Exodus. Two weeks ago we looked at the story of the Burning Bush. In it we learned that God's name given to Moses means that the God who is self-existent, sovereign, and almighty has revealed himself to the people of God. And in this revelation we are called into relationship with this almighty and sovereign God. Last week we looked at the story of the Passover. In it we learned that God's sovereignty and grace are interconnected, and that this grace is extended to us by way of the blood of Christ. When we are covered by this blood, we are protected, cleansed, and atoned. Today we take a look at the story of the Parting of the Red Sea.

If you recall from Sunday School, shortly after the Tenth Plague befell Egypt and the firstborn of man and beast was killed, Pharaoh's heart was finally softened to release Israel from bondage. Once the Israelites collected their things, they began their exodus out of Egypt. God decided to

take them the long way around through the wilderness, rather than try and fight their way through the Land of the Philistines. Leading up to the Red Sea, we have this image of God's protection in the form of a column of cloud by day and a column of fire by night. It's important to note that the pillars of fire and cloud went *before* the people. God was actively leading his people away from Egypt. Day and night they traveled because God was in the vanguard. This passage speaks of more than mere cloud and fire. It speaks of a divine providence that overshadows and guides God's people in every generation, in every wilderness through which they must go. My friends, we will find ourselves in the wilderness. Maybe you're in it now, or maybe you see it coming ahead, or maybe, thanks be to God, you've just made your way through it. Each of us will wander through the wilderness. But the glorious truth that gives us hope in the midst of the wilderness is that God leads the way.

To make matters worse for the Israelites, they soon found themselves quite literally stuck between a rock and a hard place. God had lead them straight to the Red Sea. Now, this was no major problem, so long as the Israelites had time to ferry across. However, God warns Moses that he's going to harden Pharaoh's heart one more time so that Pharaoh will pursue the Israelites. We learn in verse four God does this to "get glory over Pharaoh and all his host," and so that the Egyptians will know that he is the Lord. So, we have this great multitude of people who now need to cross the Red Sea in extreme haste. That's so telling of our situations sometimes. Every now and again we find ourselves in a relatively joyful state, only to have the tables turned all of a sudden. At which point we begin to try and rush God. "Oh Lord I just want this surgery done already." "Oh Lord I just want my financial woes gone now." "Oh Lord why can't you hurry up and fix this?" Beloved, God is not some magician or genie from whom we seek three wishes. If the story of the Red Sea teaches us anything, it's that God puts us in between a rock and a hard place to show to us his glory. God sometimes puts us between a raging sea and a raging army so that we won't rely on our own will, but rather on the will of the Father. Which is exactly what happens to the Israelites. Even before God parts the Red Sea, Scripture tells us that God, in the form of an angel, moves the pillars of cloud and fire *behind* the Israelites. God does this in order to stall the Egyptians' march against the Hebrews. God, if he sees fit, has no qualms with interfering on our behalf. And you know God does this in little ways, too. Like the delay you experience when you forget your car keys may very well be God protecting you from the dump truck that runs the red light. When our trust and faith are firmly in God, will we then witness his majesty.

The story of the Parting of the Red Sea presents to us four practical life lessons. The first lesson is none of us escapes the trying circumstances of life. Tragedy befalls everyone. That's a fact of life. Unfortunately, tragedy is going to be around for a long time. We face trials because we live in a fallen and sinful world. Evil and tragedy exist because sin exists. And no matter what your income is, no matter how young you are, and no matter how good or bad you may be, no one escapes the trying circumstances of life. From cancer, to sudden death, to freak accidents, to financial ruin; no one is free from such maladies. And we know we don't need to look far to find it. Somewhere along the way, a Red Sea is going to be stretching out before us, and a Pharaoh's army will be in hot pursuit.

The second lesson is that we are most vulnerable in times of trial. Put another way, the trying circumstances of life give Satan his greatest opportunity to divert us from our journey of faith.

Anyone is susceptible to this, just look at the Apostle Peter. In the Garden of Gethsemane, Peter was willing to defend Jesus with the sword and even cut off the ear of a soldier. Only a few hours later we find Peter lurking in a palace courtyard and thrice denying he ever knew Jesus. In his moment of strife, when Peter's own life and reputation were on the line, he submitted to denial. Several decades ago, the Dallas Museum of Art installed a piece by French sculptor Auguste Rodin, called *The Gates of Hell*. This was a colossal statue that sought to depict the pathos of the human condition: our sufferings, struggles, despairs, and temptations. Across the street from the museum is the First United Methodist Church of Dallas. The pastor there, preaching shortly after the installment of *The Gates of Hell*, told his congregation, "No matter which door we exit today, we will see the gates of hell: always tempting us to love less than God demands, to live less than Christ expects, to be less than the church we were called to be, and more like the world than we can afford to be."¹ In our most trying circumstances, Satan likes to swing wide the gates to take advantage of our suffering and despair, and divert us from the journey of faith through the narrow gate. We must resist the temptation to turn back to false supports, much like the Israelites did when they longed for the false comforts of slavery in Egypt. We must continue to trust in the Lord, knowing that while deliverance may not come today or tomorrow, deliverance is on the way and is most assuredly ours.

The third lesson is that God wants to use all circumstances for our good and for his glory. The Apostle Paul writes in Romans 8:28, "All things work together for good, for those who are called according to God's purpose." Everything, whether it be opportunity, tragedy, or comedy, everything arcs toward goodness in God's design. This is often hard to grasp, but it is truth we need to hang onto. Recall Joseph, one of Jacob's sons, who was so hated by his brothers they plotted to kill him and ended up selling him into slavery. He wound up in Egypt where he was falsely accused of adultery, arrested, and nearly killed. He later found his way into Pharaoh's favor and was eventually raised to Prime Minister of Egypt. In this post he was able to save his father's family from famine through his wise economic planning. When he encountered his brothers, he told them that while they meant evil and harm against him, God meant them for good and for his divine purposes. The novelist Alexander Solzhenitsyn shared a similar experience. While a political prisoner in a Soviet gulag, Solzhenitsyn found himself struggling to perform the back-breaking tasks of the Soviets. He took a break, knowing full well that the guards could have him beaten to death. While sitting, an elderly man approached him, and speechlessly drew a cross on the ground at Solzhenitsyn's feet. As he stared at the outline, "his entire perspective shifted. He knew he was merely one man against the all-powerful Soviet Empire. Yet in that moment, he knew that the hope of mankind was represented by that simple cross—and through its power, anything was possible."² The cross, the very tool of evil and tragedy, is transformed into a symbol of hope, all this by a man whose experience of tragedy and trial bought us eternal freedom.

The fourth and final lesson is that in this struggle between good and evil, victory is with God. Nothing is more obvious than the presence of evil in the universe. There is no question, no doubt, about the stark, grim, colossal reality of evil in the world. Regardless of evil's origins, there is a

¹ Walter Railey, "Plundering the Egyptians." Sermon delivered at First United Methodist Church, Dallas, TX, August 26, 1984.

² Charles W. Colson, *Loving God*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983. Page 172.

checkpoint against it. There will come a time when evil plays itself out, digs its own grave as it were, and God's righteousness and justice prevail. Verse thirty dramatically and vividly portrays this truth: "Israel saw the Egyptians dead on the seashore." In demonstrating his power, God parted the Red Sea and allowed his people to walk through on dry ground. But when the Egyptians were in the midst of the sea, seeking to capture the Hebrews and return them to Pharaoh's bondage, God released the parted waters and the Egyptian army was drowned. Now, the meaning of the story is not found in the drowning of the Egyptian soldiers. No one should ever rejoice at the death or defeat of another human being. Rather, the story symbolizes the death of evil—God's victory in the struggle between good and evil. This victory in the Exodus connects that event with Easter. Easter gives universal and eternal meaning to the particular experience of the Exodus. Here is God's ultimate act of both love and power, shattering the tomb, pulling out the fangs of death, and announcing the triumph of eternal life.

The story of the Exodus and the Parting of the Red Sea are well told and well loved by the Jewish people. The stories remind them that God will never leave his children. God will always guide and care for us, even if and when we gripe and turn away from him. We have a shared experience. When it looked like God had given up on the human race, he sent his only begotten Son into our midst. Jesus' life, death, and resurrection closely mirror the journey of the Israelites. The ups and downs of this rollercoaster called life was experienced by our Lord Jesus. He overcame the cosmic struggle between good and evil. And we can share in that victory by way of our adoption. Brothers and sisters in Christ, this is the very good news of God's protection.

Let us pray. Powerful and sovereign God, you are our protector. You shelter us from eternal damnation like a mother hen shelters her chicks. You guard us against the angel of destruction when we are cleansed by the blood of Christ, our Paschal Lamb. You call to us and give us your name, because you desire to be in relationship with us. Our communion with you empowers us and encourages us to respond to your call. Your almighty name also reminds us that when tragedy comes upon us or we find ourselves between a rock and a hard place, we know that you are there and will deliver us from total ruin. For this we are eternally grateful. Amen and amen.