

# Deliverance From Slavery

Message 10

## *Destroying Pharaoh's Army*

Exodus 13:17-14:31

### *Courting Disaster*

Have you ever been sucked into a plan that led to disaster? Maybe as a child your older brother coaxed you into a scheme for raiding the cookie jar. You did not plan to drop the jar and break it. Later, nursing your wounds, you resented your older brother for getting you into that mess. Did you ever have a family vacation that went wrong? Dad got a great deal on a shore house in Maine. So instead of going to the mountains as usual, you went to Maine in June. It sounded like a good idea – until you discovered that the Maine water is freezing cold in June and the mosquitoes are unbearable. Then it rained all week and the DVD player broke. Ever since, you hold a grudge against your father for that miserable week. Most debacles you find yourself in come about through misunderstandings or poor planning. But how would you feel if your dad *intentionally* set up a miserable vacation? Calvin, of *Calvin and Hobbes* fame, felt this way whenever his dad planned an outdoor vacation, but that was because Calvin was a softie. And it did not soothe Calvin's raw feelings to hear his father call it a character-building opportunity.

To the Israelites it appeared that God had led them into a deadly disaster. They could have escaped from Egypt quickly along the highway through the Philistine territory. It was a straight and easy route along the coast of the Mediterranean Sea. But no, God thought they could not handle the Philistines they would meet there. So instead God took them out into the wilderness. It was a crazy idea. There was no food out there. Water was extremely hard to find. It was round about. But God was convinced they could not handle the Philistines, so there they were, heading out into nowhere. They made slow progress, and when it came time to camp, they had gone only as far as the Red Sea. Now you do not have to be a military genius to recognize that camping in front of a body of water is a bad idea. Recently I read *Almost a Miracle*, a book about the Revolutionary War. Over and over camp placements were discussed – and a primary issue in every case was how to defend or escape from the encampment. Camping in front of the Red Sea was an invitation to disaster, but hey – God must know what He is doing.

Meanwhile Pharaoh came to his senses. Whatever was wrong with him?! How could he just let several million valuable slaves escape? This was craziness! So Pharaoh called up the army. He rounded up everyone – the officers, the 600 crack chariots, and all the rest of the chariots and soldiers. Moses had provoked him long enough. It was time to put an end to this foolishness. And the power of Egypt would soon overcome those stupid Hebrew slaves.

Hundreds of chariots and horses, with thousands of soldiers stir up quite a dust storm. While they were still a long way off the Israelites could see the cloud of dust that could mean only one thing – they were doomed. No one could outrun Pharaoh's chariots. And besides, they were trapped by the Red Sea. The only logical conclusion was that God had led them into a disaster. And since God was not presently at hand, they took out their fear, frustration, and anger on Moses – God's servant.

### *Fire and Cloud*

It is not really correct to say that God was not present. He was. Back when God called Moses to return to Egypt and lead the Israelites to Canaan, God had promised to go with them. Moses had put up a lot of resistance to this dangerous plan. "Who am I," he said, "that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the children of Israel out of Egypt?" God did not answer that question directly. Moses actually had impressive credentials, but this mission was so great that only God could accomplish it. Instead, God promised Moses that He would go with him and bring the Israelites out of Egypt by His own power. And now God is present with Moses and all the people. He is even visible. By day God was present in a pillar of cloud, and at night

He was present in a pillar of fire.

This is not the first time God has appeared in fire and cloud, but in this event they become the defining symbols of God's presence. When God made His covenant with Abraham in Genesis 15, He appeared to Abraham in a smoking fire pot. And when He appeared to Moses in the desert, He appeared in a burning bush. But now for the next 40 years God will go with the Israelites in the form of a pillar of cloud and fire. And for all time cloud and fire will be evidence of God's presence. Let us look at a few of the many references to God's presence in fire and cloud. We shall begin with the Psalms.

In my distress I called upon the LORD;  
to my God I cried for help.  
From his temple he heard my voice,  
and my cry to him reached his ears.  
Then the earth reeled and rocked;  
the foundations also of the mountains trembled and quaked, because he was angry.  
Smoke went up from his nostrils, and devouring fire from his mouth;  
glowing coals flamed forth from him.  
He bowed the heavens and came down;  
thick darkness was under his feet.  
He rode on a cherub and flew;  
he came swiftly on the wings of the wind.  
He made darkness his covering,  
his canopy around him, thick clouds dark with water.  
Out of the brightness before him  
hailstones and coals of fire broke through his clouds.  
The LORD also thundered in the heavens, and the Most High uttered his voice,  
hailstones and coals of fire.  
And he sent out his arrows and scattered them;  
he flashed forth lightnings and routed them.

Psalm 18:6-14

The LORD reigns, let the earth rejoice;  
let the many coastlands be glad!  
Clouds and thick darkness are all around him;  
righteousness and justice are the foundation of his throne.  
Fire goes before him  
and burns up his adversaries all around.  
His lightnings light up the world;  
the earth sees and trembles.

Psalm 97:1-4

When Solomon came to the throne, he built the temple as the house of God on earth. When the temple was finished, God came to dwell there. Let us read the account of God's arrival in His new house.

And when the priests came out of the Holy Place, a cloud filled the house of the LORD, so that the priests could not stand to minister because of the cloud, for the glory of the LORD filled the house of the LORD. 1 Kings 8:10-11

The account in Chronicles adds some further details to this event.

As soon as Solomon finished his prayer, fire came down from heaven and consumed the burnt offering and the sacrifices, and the glory of the LORD filled the temple. And the priests could not enter the house of the LORD, because the glory of the LORD filled the LORD's house. When all the people of Israel saw the fire come down and the glory of the LORD on the temple, they bowed down with their faces to the ground on the pavement and worshiped and gave thanks to the LORD, saying, "For he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever." 2 Chronicles 7:1-3

So you see when God came to dwell in His temple, He appeared as fire and cloud. Isaiah prophesied a day when Israel would repent of her sins and God would fill the whole city with His divine presence.

Then the LORD will create over the whole site of Mount Zion and over her assemblies a cloud by day, and smoke and the shining of a flaming fire by night; for over all the glory there will be a canopy. Isaiah 4:5

Let's read Ezekiel's account of his vision of God.

On the fifth day of the month...the word of the LORD came to Ezekiel the priest, the son of Buzi, in the land of the Chaldeans by the Chebar canal, and the hand of the LORD was upon him there. As I looked, behold, a stormy wind came out of the north, and a great cloud, with brightness around it, and fire flashing forth continually, and in the midst of the fire, as it were gleaming metal. Ezekiel 1:2-4

Jesus was accompanied by a cloud in His transfiguration and when He ascended to the Father. The Revelation to St. John is full of visions of God, often including clouds, fire, or both. And when God came to fill the New Covenant church, He came as small pillars of fire.

When the day of Pentecost arrived, they were all together in one place. And suddenly there came from heaven a sound like a mighty rushing wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. And divided tongues as of fire appeared to them and rested on each one of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit gave them utterance. Acts 2:1-4

This is just a small sampling of the hundreds of instances of God's presence revealed in fire and/or cloud. I encourage you to be alert to notice the use of cloud and fire as indicators of God's presence as you read the scriptures on your own.

### ***Who Hardened Pharaoh's Heart?***

To the Israelites it appeared that God had made a terrible blunder. He led them into a trap from which there was no escape. But in fact God chose to camp in front of the Red Sea so that he could trap the Egyptians. God knew that Pharaoh would repent of his willingness to let the Israelites leave. God knew Pharaoh would come chasing after them. So God deliberately sent the Israelites to camp there so that God could destroy the whole Egyptian army.

God knows all things, of course. But our text tells us that God not only *knew* that Pharaoh would come after the Israelites. It says that *God* changed Pharaoh's heart so that he would break his promise to Moses.

This is not the first time we have seen that God hardened Pharaoh's heart – and perhaps you have been troubled by it. Perhaps we can understand that God would attack Pharaoh for abusing His people. We might agree that Pharaoh deserved to die for his heinous crimes – especially in the face of multiple oppor-

tunities to repent. But when we add to the picture that God *Himself* made Pharaoh unwilling to let the Israelites go, this seems absolutely unfair. Worse than unfair – it seems monstrously, perversely unjust. And it is such passages as this that provoke some people to say that if this is what God is like, they want nothing to do with Him. And it is just such responses that move Christians to defend God by explaining that He did not *really* harden Pharaoh’s heart. It is just a manner of speaking, they say. Pharaoh had free will which God did not violate. All God did was push him to the brink. But Pharaoh walked over on his own.

This is a difficult and complex topic. We will have time merely to sketch out the main lines of thought. As we discuss this, you must remember two essential points of scripture. First, God is sovereign. Second, man is responsible. Whatever else we say, these two points are made repeatedly throughout all scripture. To deny either one is to deny half of the Bible.

When we say God is sovereign, we mean that He rules and controls all things. We use the word “sovereign” to describe the authority of a king or a state. “Sovereign” is a synonym for king, and we talk about sovereign states. This means that such states are able to make all their own decisions. They do not have to look to some other state for permission. This is in contrast to a client state like the countries of Eastern Europe under Soviet domination. But sovereign kings or states, while not beholden to any other power, are not actually able to control everything. The forces of nature, the actions of other states, and the whims of their own people bring conditions that may be beneficial or harmful – but no one can control them. The sovereignty of God is different in that nothing is outside of His control. That is what we mean when we say that God is omnipotent – all powerful. God is not a finite creature. He is an infinite being, with infinite wisdom and power. He not only created the universe, He also sustains it by His power. God constantly pours His energy into the universe – otherwise it would no longer exist. God is constantly keeping you alive. When God withholds His power, you will die. And God kept Pharaoh alive until it was time for him to die. This means that God controls everything we do. God did indeed harden Pharaoh’s heart. God also made you desire to come to Lehigh and brought you here. God even gave you the faith to believe in Him.

Now if we stop there, we have described a philosophy named determinism. This philosophy states that there is some person or principle in the universe which determines what we do, and no one is able to withstand it. This philosophy is related to fatalism – a life resigned to fate. People who think this way make little effort to chart the course of their lives, since they have no power over what happens. But this is not what the Bible teaches. The Bible teaches over and over – on every page – that man is responsible for his own actions. This is rooted in man’s nature – a creature made in God’s image. God has a will. God makes decisions and acts on them. Since man is made in God’s image, he also has a will. Man is not a puppet. He has real thoughts and feelings – and he is able to act on them. And as a creature of God, man is responsible for his actions. Again, this is all over the Bible. From the first chapter to the last, man is held accountable to God for his behavior. He is given God’s commands, urged to obey, and punished when he fails. This includes Pharaoh. Did you notice that while these chapters have repeatedly stated that God will harden Pharaoh’s heart, they have also repeatedly said that Pharaoh hardened his own heart.

Well, which is it, you say. Did God harden Pharaoh’s heart, or did Pharaoh harden his own heart? Does God determine what shall come to pass, or does man make his own decisions? Some people, out of a laudable zeal for God’s glory, insist that God is sovereign – and they compromise man’s will to make maximum room for God’s sovereignty. Others, in a commendable zeal for man’s dignity, insist that man has a free will – and they compromise God’s sovereignty to make room for man’s will. Both of these positions are wrong because they distort scripture. The Bible teaches emphatically that God is sovereign and man is responsible – and it allows no compromise of either truth.

So who hardened Pharaoh’s heart? God did. Pharaoh did. Both God and Pharaoh hardened Pharaoh’s heart. I suppose by now you are becoming annoyed with me. This is ridiculous. How can both God

and Pharaoh be responsible for this awful deed? This sounds like double talk.

No, it is not double talk. We are trying to explain a divine mystery. The interaction of God's sovereignty and man's responsibility is as mysterious as the trinity, the dual nature of Christ, and the presence of Christ in the sacraments. These are realities which scripture teaches and we experience. We can understand something about them, but complete understanding eludes us. This is frustrating, but understandable. If God is infinite and we are finite, it would be illogical to suppose that we could understand everything about Him. On the contrary, what makes sense is that there are frontiers of our knowledge that we can see, but not cross. And in fact attempts to do so often lead to heresy.

There is much more to be said, but we will close this discussion with two points of application. First, praise God for all He has done for you. Are you intelligent? Healthy? Do you believe in Jesus? Is your life going in a positive direction? Praise God! He has brought all this to pass. As Paul said in his letter to the Romans...

...for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus...Then what becomes of our boasting? It is excluded.  
Romans 3:23-24, 27

Even your salvation is not something you can claim as your own accomplishment. God sovereignly worked in your life to bring you to Jesus. This should move you to constant praise for His amazing grace!

Second, obey God. God gave you a will to exercise, and you are responsible for your actions. Do not wickedly try to hide behind God's power to excuse your behavior.

### ***Salvation Through Destruction***

And now we return for the last time this evening to the trap by the Red Sea. What the Israelites did not see at first was that God sent them there to lure Pharaoh into a trap of God's own. Intoxicated with lust for power, greed for slaves, and rage over his dead son – Pharaoh soon forgot that he was no match for the God of the Hebrews. Dashing ever faster across the plain, Pharaoh led his army into the slaughter. But it was not the Hebrews who were slaughtered. God stood between His people and the Egyptians. Like a good shepherd He protected them from their enemies.

Give ear, O Shepherd of Israel, you who lead Joseph like a flock!  
You who are enthroned upon the cherubim, shine forth...  
You brought a vine out of Egypt;  
you drove out the nations and planted it.  
Psalm 80:1,8

And when all the children of Israel had crossed safely, God moved aside and allowed Pharaoh to chase them through the path across the Red Sea. Then when the whole army had gone too far to turn back, the trap snapped shut, and all the Egyptians were drowned.

This also is an event that troubles some people. They rejoice that God rescued His people – but why kill all those Egyptians? Why not just keep them back in Egypt? The reason people think this way is that they forget that we deserve to die because of our sin. The Egyptians received justice. They deserved to die for their sins. They refused to worship the only God who should be worshiped, and they attacked God's people. The Egyptians deserved to die long ago, but God was merciful. Year after year God allowed the Egyptians to torment His people while He waited for them to repent. And in the end the Egyptians refused to submit to God. They were responsible for their own actions. They deserved to die. Justice was served.

Another way of looking at this situation is to see that sin produces real evil in this world. People tend to talk about evil as if it were merely a concept or a substance. This is wrong. Evil is the act of rebellion against God. And rebellion against God produces all the evils that we see in this world. Those who rebel against God ultimately trash God's creation and attack God's people. They are enemies of God. In this life God's people are called to love our enemies and do good to them. But as long as they live, evil people will hate God and the people who love Him. The only solution – the only way to provide permanent safety for God's people – is to kill their enemies. As we have said so many times during this study of Exodus, God is amazingly, unreasonably patient and merciful with His enemies. God endures attacks by those who hate Him for years and years. But in the end they must die, unless they repent and submit to God. This is not the job of God's people. We are called to love our enemies. But someday this universe as we know it will come to an end. Then all evil will be abolished and all who hate God will die forever. Until then, the death of the Egyptians is a sign to the rest of us to repent while there is time.

Where do you stand before God tonight? Do you love and obey Him? Or are you offended that God rules the earth and does things you do not understand? I hope you can see that you cannot escape God's powerful rule. Pharaoh could not escape God's power, and neither can you. But God is also merciful, and He invites you to become part of His people, to come under His protection, to worship Him. All of us have sinned and deserve to die, but Jesus took the guilt of our sin and died in our place. If you will believe in Jesus, the judgment of God is finished and you can live in the freedom of peace with Him.

If you are already a believer, are you warning and encouraging your friends with this gospel? Just as surely as Pharaoh's army rotted in the Red Sea, your friends will perish forever unless they repent of their sins. Like Moses, you can plead with them to give up their evil ways and believe in Christ. May God soften our hearts and make us strong evangelists – for the sake of His glory and the love of our friends.

C. David Green  
Lehigh University  
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