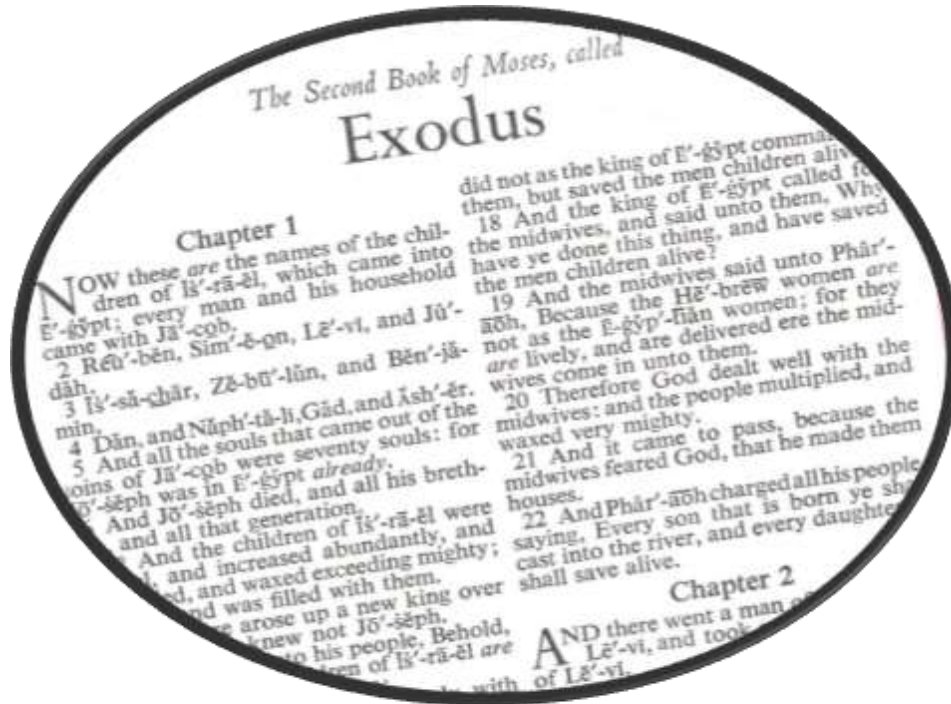


EXODUS – WEEK 8

WEAK FAITH ON THE MARCH



F. Michael Slay
A DEEP Study

The Fellowship of Ailbe

Exodus 12:40–14:14 – Weak Faith on the March

Israel starts out on the right foot as Moses details how they are to celebrate the Passover.

But soon the Egyptian posse catches up with them and their faith seems to evaporate. Moses calms the crowd, but they need a miracle and they need it now.

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Thank you.

Exodus 12:40–14:14 – Weak Faith on the March
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1 Exodus 12:40-49 (NKJV)

Now the sojourn of the children of Israel who lived in Egypt was four hundred and thirty years. And it came to pass at the end of the four hundred and thirty years—on that very same day—it came to pass that all the armies of the LORD went out from the land of Egypt. It is a night of solemn observance to the LORD for bringing them out of the land of Egypt. This is that night of the LORD, a solemn observance for all the children of Israel throughout their generations.

And the LORD said to Moses and Aaron, “This is the ordinance of the Passover: No foreigner shall eat it. But every man’s servant who is bought for money, when you have circumcised him, then he may eat it. A sojourner and a hired servant shall not eat it. In one house it shall be eaten; you shall not carry any of the flesh outside the house, nor shall you break one of its bones. All the congregation of Israel shall keep it. And when a stranger dwells with you and wants to keep the Passover to the LORD, let all his males be circumcised, and then let him come near and keep it; and he shall be as a native of the land. For no uncircumcised person shall eat it. One law shall be for the native-born and for the stranger who dwells among you.”

These Passover rules are needed because the people who fled Egypt were not all Israelites.

A mixed multitude went up with them also, – Exodus 12:38a (NKJV)

Now the son of an Israelite woman, whose father was an Egyptian, went out among the people of Israel: – Leviticus 24:10a (NKJV)

Romance is common between neighboring peoples, plus the Egyptians must have been beyond frustrated with their own government. There would have been many who were close enough to the people of Israel to have been warned about the Passover. Some may have even participated. Deciding to become a refugee is a bold leap, but some Egyptians made that choice.

So, in a precursor of the new covenant, God sets up some rules for this mixed multitude. Anyone can join in the Passover celebration, but they must submit their whole household to circumcision. Nothing less than a full-up religious conversion will do.

Otherwise, they’re just visitors.

Leaving Egypt had to involve a lot of heartache. Imagine failing to convince a friend to come along. Imagine failing to convince a friend to do the Passover sacrifice!

Many of us have similar heartaches. People long to help the ones they love, but some friends and family don’t want our help.

Ask the LORD to comfort those in these struggles and to glorify Himself through their growth.

2 Exodus 12:50-13:10 (NKJV)

Thus all the children of Israel did; as the LORD commanded Moses and Aaron, so they did. And it came to pass, on that very same day, that the LORD brought the children of Israel out of the land of Egypt according to their armies.

Then the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, “Consecrate to Me all the firstborn, whatever opens the womb among the children of Israel, both of man and beast; it is Mine.”

And Moses said to the people: “Remember this day in which you went out of Egypt, out of the house of bondage; for by strength of hand the LORD brought you out of this place. No leavened bread shall be eaten. On this day you are going out, in the month Abib. And it shall be, when the LORD brings you into the land of the Canaanites and the Hittites and the Amorites and the Hivites and the Jebusites, which He swore to your fathers to give you, a land flowing with milk and honey, that you shall keep this service in this month. Seven days you shall eat unleavened bread, and on the seventh day there shall be a feast to the LORD. Unleavened bread shall be eaten seven days. And no leavened bread shall be seen among you, nor shall leaven be seen among you in all your quarters. And you shall tell your son in that day, saying, ‘This is done because of what the LORD did for me when I came up from Egypt.’ It shall be as a sign to you on your hand and as a memorial between your eyes, that the LORD’s law may be in your mouth; for with a strong hand the LORD has brought you out of Egypt. You shall therefore keep this ordinance in its season from year to year.”

Passover is the mother of all holidays. It’s probably not the first annual celebration – pagan celebrations of the solstice are ancient – but Passover sets the standard.

Real holidays are an annual commemoration of an historical event: the birth of Christ, the Declaration of Independence, the armistice at the end of WWI. While the celebration can turn into excessive revelry, partying isn’t the point. Unlike, say, the last day of school, these celebrations are to remind us of something important, something we should remember.

Passover takes a whole week. It uses unleavened bread. It has a curriculum. A unique solemnity is imposed. When God institutes a holiday, He does it right. Compare that to, say, St. Patrick’s Day, which commemorates one of the most influential Christians in history. Yet, when we think of St. Patrick’s Day, we think of green beer. Ouch. And then there’s what we’ve done with Christmas.

It’s amazing that God tolerates that.

We’ve let commercial interests take over Christmas and St. Patrick’s Day – and virtually everything else. That’s almost unavoidable in a free society. The church’s job is to counter that by shining the light of the gospel on all this chaos. But how?

We can’t stop all the silliness; we can only provide a serious counterpoint. There’s no secret trick. Just be genuine in your faith and how you celebrate holidays. People notice these things.

3 Exodus 13:11-16 (NKJV)

“And it shall be, when the LORD brings you into the land of the Canaanites, as He swore to you and your fathers, and gives it to you, that you shall set apart to the LORD all that open the womb, that is, every firstborn that comes from an animal which you have; the males shall be the LORD’s. But every firstborn of a donkey you shall redeem with a lamb; and if you will not redeem it, then you shall break its neck. And all the firstborn of man among your sons you shall redeem. So it shall be, when your son asks you in time to come, saying, ‘What is this?’ that you shall say to him, ‘By strength of hand the LORD brought us out of Egypt, out of the house of bondage. And it came to pass, when Pharaoh was stubborn about letting us go, that the LORD killed all the firstborn in the land of Egypt, both the firstborn of man and the firstborn of beast. Therefore I sacrifice to the LORD all males that open the womb, but all the firstborn of my sons I redeem.’ It shall be as a sign on your hand and as frontlets between your eyes, for by strength of hand the LORD brought us out of Egypt.”

Well, that’s inconvenient. God is demanding that all the firstborn males be sacrificed to Him, or redeemed by the sacrifice of a lamb. Why would God impose such a great burden on his people? They’re heading into a desert. Survival will be challenging. This will be hard to obey.

Good. That’s the point.

Separating real believers from the poseurs is a relentless theme in the Bible. Doing something like this, which makes absolutely no sense from a secular point of view, is a test of seriousness.

But tests don’t just separate winners from losers. God’s tests also turn losers into winners. The Israelites will learn to depend on Him and that they can count on Him. Their faith will grow through tests.

That will be the story, over and over, as they wander in the desert.

For an American, Christianity isn’t anywhere near this costly. For a politician, being a Christian can be a big advantage. This holds for other things too. We may choose to sacrifice for Christ, but it’s still a choice. This results in a lot of weak believers.

Many Christians around the world don’t have this problem. Persecution is rampant, especially in Muslim countries. That keeps out the riff-raff. There’s no such thing as cheap faith there.

Please pray for these persecuted Christians. I couldn’t handle one hour of the deprivations they endure every day. We rarely even witness the kind of evil they live with – or live under. Pray for their physical protection. Pray that the forces of darkness will be thwarted.

Also pray for the unfortunates who are tools of the evil one. Pray like this is war.

It is war.

4 Exodus 13:17-22 (NKJV)

Then it came to pass, when Pharaoh had let the people go, that God did not lead them by way of the land of the Philistines, although that was near; for God said, “Lest perhaps the people change their minds when they see war, and return to Egypt.” So God led the people around by way of the wilderness of the Red Sea. And the children of Israel went up in orderly ranks out of the land of Egypt.

And Moses took the bones of Joseph with him, for he had placed the children of Israel under solemn oath, saying, “God will surely visit you, and you shall carry up my bones from here with you.”

So they took their journey from Succoth and camped in Etham at the edge of the wilderness. And the LORD went before them by day in a pillar of cloud to lead the way, and by night in a pillar of fire to give them light, so as to go by day and night. He did not take away the pillar of cloud by day or the pillar of fire by night from before the people.

So, this enormous entourage is being led by a *pillar of cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night*. But the pillar turns right toward the Red Sea instead of taking them the direct route. I can just hear Moses’s GPS complaining, “*In 200 feet, make a U-turn.*”

The northern end of the Red Sea forks into the Gulf of Suez to the west, and the Gulf of Aqabah to the east. The Gulf of Suez is now connected to the Mediterranean Sea by the Suez Canal.

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Suez_Canal

Many Bibles note that the Hebrew for Red Sea is “yam sup,” which can mean sea of reeds. Some scholars speculate that the Israelites didn’t actually cross the Red Sea but the sea of reeds, presumably some marshy area near where the canal was eventually cut. This leads to a natural explanation for the parting of the Red Sea. A combination of tides and normal winds could have been sufficient to let the Israelis pass but drowned the Egyptians later after their chariots got stuck and the tide came in.

However, two references support viewing yam sup as the Red Sea. First, yam sup also appears in 1 Kings 9:26. There it means the Gulf of Aqabah – thus the Red Sea and not the sea of reeds. Second, the Septuagint translates yam sup as the Red Sea.

People are funny about miracles. They want to believe but can’t stop searching for natural explanations for everything. That’s OK – it’s what science is all about – but for some Bible stories it misses the point.

While God does many wondrous things naturally, some things are simply miracles.

To become a Christian, you have to believe in at least one miracle – the resurrection.

Then there’s answered prayer. Not every prayer request gets granted though. God’s agenda comes first.

But pray a lot and you’ll see some big, stop-your-heart miracles. They inspire big, stop-your-heart faith.

5 Exodus 14:1-9 (NKJV)

Now the LORD spoke to Moses, saying: “Speak to the children of Israel, that they turn and camp before Pi Hahiroth, between Migdol and the sea, opposite Baal Zephon; you shall camp before it by the sea. For Pharaoh will say of the children of Israel, ‘They are bewildered by the land; the wilderness has closed them in.’ Then I will harden Pharaoh’s heart, so that he will pursue them; and I will gain honor over Pharaoh and over all his army, that the Egyptians may know that I am the LORD.” And they did so.

Now it was told the king of Egypt that the people had fled, and the heart of Pharaoh and his servants was turned against the people; and they said, “Why have we done this, that we have let Israel go from serving us?” So he made ready his chariot and took his people with him. Also, he took six hundred choice chariots, and all the chariots of Egypt with captains over every one of them. And the LORD hardened the heart of Pharaoh king of Egypt, and he pursued the children of Israel; and the children of Israel went out with boldness. So the Egyptians pursued them, all the horses and chariots of Pharaoh, his horsemen and his army, and overtook them camping by the sea beside Pi Hahiroth, before Baal Zephon.

Sun Tzu, in his classic “The Art of War,” teaches that an army with its back to the sea will fight courageously. <http://suntzusaid.com/book/11> (Paragraphs 23-25)

But the Israelites are definitely no army, and that is definitely not God’s plan here. They will be complete chickens. God will rescue them and *get glory over Pharaoh and all his host*.

Wait. What? Of course the creator of time, dimension, matter and energy has the power to drown Pharaoh’s army. Big deal. What’s so glorifying about that? Gaining honor *over Pharaoh* is small potatoes.

This is really all about the grand design of God’s plan of salvation. God will patiently lead a fallen people: rescuing them, teaching them, warning them, encouraging them, rebuking them, winnowing them down to a remnant – and finally redeeming them.

Now that’s glorious.

We live on the other side of the great redemption. The glory of that plan has been achieved.

Jesus spoke these words, lifted up His eyes to heaven, and said: “Father, the hour has come. Glorify Your Son, that Your Son also may glorify You.” – John 17:1 (NKJV)

So, what’s left? How can we further glorify God? By cooperating with how He glorifies Himself.

“Most assuredly, I say to you, he who believes in Me, the works that I do he will do also; and greater works than these he will do, because I go to My Father. And whatever you ask in My name, that I will do, that the Father may be glorified in the Son.” – John 14:12-13 (NKJV)

By this My Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit; so you will be My disciples. – John 15:8 (NKJV)

6 Exodus 14:10-14 (NKJV)

And when Pharaoh drew near, the children of Israel lifted their eyes, and behold, the Egyptians marched after them. So they were very afraid, and the children of Israel cried out to the LORD. Then they said to Moses, “Because there were no graves in Egypt, have you taken us away to die in the wilderness? Why have you so dealt with us, to bring us up out of Egypt? Is this not the word that we told you in Egypt, saying, ‘Let us alone that we may serve the Egyptians’? For it would have been better for us to serve the Egyptians than that we should die in the wilderness.”

And Moses said to the people, “Do not be afraid. Stand still, and see the salvation of the LORD, which He will accomplish for you today. For the Egyptians whom you see today, you shall see again no more forever. The LORD will fight for you, and you shall hold your peace.”

Can they possibly be this stupid? They just witnessed ten supernatural plagues, especially the Passover – where they had to slaughter a kid or a lamb and splatter its blood on their homes to avoid death. Now they are literally being led by the LORD, going *before them by day in a pillar of cloud to lead the way, and by night in a pillar of fire to give them light.* – Ex. 13:21 (NKJV)

With all this evidence, can they really have so little faith?

You bet. Peter denied Christ three times. All the disciples were totally deflated after Jesus died, even though He had clearly predicted his death, particularly at The Last Supper. They’d seen plenty of evidence, but hit them with enough stress and it’s all forgotten.

Note that, the disciples had only been witnessing God’s hand for three years – and the Israelites even less than that. Spiritual growth takes time and unshakable faith is not the stuff of beginners. It takes a while to get used to being a believer. This is the background for Paul’s lessons about the old self and the new self in Colossians 3 and Ephesians 4.

Our spiritual attitudes change more quickly than our “spiritual reflexes.” One of the reasons that USMC training is so grueling is that they have to pound some things all the way into their reflexes. It’s more difficult to do the right thing when you don’t have time to think.

“Reflexes” isn’t exactly the right word for how we react. New believers believe, but they’re not used to it yet. All their spiritual “instincts” (not the right word either) are still the old self. This just takes time.

And boy is it frustrating.

One of the quirkiest things about being a Christian is learning not to expect instant progress. Repentant people are unhappy with who they are. As we grow in Christ, we see our sin ever more clearly and are increasingly offended by it. We know this takes time, but we feel like praying, “LORD, give me patience and give it to me now!”

Be patient with yourself.

Questions for reflection or discussion

1. Have you ever made a bold, life changing, leap-of-faith decision?
2. Do you do anything special for holidays that serves as a witness of your faith?
3. Has your Christian faith ever cost you?
4. Do you “pray big” – i.e. ask for things that have no chance of happening without divine intervention?
5. Have you seen an answered prayer that seemed to especially glorify God (not just help you)?
6. What are you most quickly frustrated by?

Items for prayer: