

EXODUS—WEEK 9

THE GREAT ESCAPE



F. Michael Slay
A DEEP Study

The Fellowship of Ailbe

*The Cover Picture is The Crossing of the Reed Sea by Cosimo Rosselli (1439–1507)
A fresco in the Sistine Chapel, Vatican City*

Israel escapes Egypt, but they don't get much of a head start. The Egyptian army starts chasing them down. Everyone is panicked.

But the LORD protects them by keeping the Egyptian army at bay.

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Thank you.

Exodus 13:11–14:20 — The Plague Holiday
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1 Exodus 13:11–16

“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, where survival will be challenging. This won’t be easy.

Good. That’s the point.

Separating real believers from the poseurs is a relentless theme in the Bible. A command 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 they will learn that they can count on Him. Their faith will grow through tests.

That will be the lesson, over and over, as they’re wandering around lost in the desert.

For an American, Christianity isn’t anywhere near this costly. For a politician, being a Christian can even be an advantage. This holds for other things too. We may choose to sacrifice for Christ, but it’s still a choice. This is how we ended up with so many weak believers.

Christians around the world don’t have this problem. Persecution is rampant, especially in Muslim countries. This weeds out the lightweights—no such thing as cheap faith there.

Please pray for these persecuted Christians. I don’t think I could handle one hour of the deprivations they endure every day. We rarely even see the kind of evil they live with—or live under.

Pray for their physical protection. Pray that the forces of darkness will be thwarted.

And pray for the “useful idiots” who are tools of the evil one. The persecutors are in the greatest danger.

Pray like this is war. It is war.

2 Exodus 13:17–22

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 byway 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 a 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 saying, “*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 Aqaba 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 (יַם־סוּף, yahm soof) literally means sea of reeds. Some scholars speculate that the Israelites didn’t actually cross the Red Sea but the sea of reeds, presumably some tidal marsh 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 Israelites pass but drowned the Egyptians later after their heavy chariots got stuck in the muck and then the tide came in.

However, two references support viewing yahm soof as the Red Sea. First, yahm soof also appears in 1 Kings 9:26. There it means the Gulf of Aqaba—thus the Red Sea and not the sea of reeds. Second, the Septuagint translates yahm soof 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 okay—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 one miracle—the resurrection. Then there’s answered prayer. Not every prayer request gets granted the way we want. God’s agenda comes first.

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

3 Exodus 14:1–9

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 Israelite caravan is no army, and that isn’t God’s plan here anyway. The Israelites will be 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. 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 is glorious.

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

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

So, what’s left? How can we contribute to this magnificent enterprise? How can we 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

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

4 Exodus 14:10–14

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.* — Exodus 13:21

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 acclimate 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. That’s the only way to get them to do the right thing when they don’t have time to think.

But “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. Thus, they tend to be frustrated with the pace of change.

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!”

Hang in there. Sanctification is a process.

5 Exodus 14:15–20

And the LORD said to Moses, “Why do you cry to Me? Tell the children of Israel to go forward. But lift up your rod, and stretch out your hand over the sea and divide it. And the children of Israel shall go on dry ground through the midst of the sea. And I indeed will harden the hearts of the Egyptians, and they shall follow them. So I will gain honor over Pharaoh and over all his army, his chariots, and his horsemen. Then the Egyptians shall know that I am the LORD, when I have gained honor for Myself over Pharaoh, his chariots, and his horsemen.”

And the Angel of God, who went before the camp of Israel, moved and went behind them; and the pillar of cloud went from before them and stood behind them. So it came between the camp of the Egyptians and the camp of Israel. Thus it was a cloud and darkness to the one, and it gave light by night to the other, so that the one did not come near the other all that night.

Don’t miss how big this miracle is. The Egyptian army rides in chariots—state of the art, high mobility weapons of war. The Israelites are on foot, and slow even for that.

Then the children of Israel journeyed from Rameses to Succoth, about six hundred thousand men on foot, besides children. A mixed multitude went up with them also, and flocks and herds—a great deal of livestock. — Exodus 12:37–38

That’s an enormous caravan. On average, at any given moment, there should be over a dozen women in labor. If Washington had to cross the Delaware with this gang, he would have never made it.

But these folks will. We aren’t given a lot of details about this miracle, but somehow the difference in the light kept the two groups apart. It may have been as simple as the Egyptians turning in because it was dark while the Israelis kept going in the light.

In any case, the Israelis put some distance between themselves and the Egyptian army. That’s significant. The Egyptian charioteers would have cut through the fleeing Israelis like a knife through butter.

But notice that this miracle only helps the Israelites get across the Red Sea. They aren’t magically teleported over.

They still have to walk.

That’s God’s style. He’s always teaching and pushing his people to grow.

That’s why His answers to prayer often go in unexpected directions. We ask for one thing and get something completely different.

And sometimes, when we pray for help with a particularly difficult situation, we hear only crickets. That can be because bailing us out of a tight spot defeats the purpose of the tight spot.

God isn’t canceling an important learning experience.

Questions for reflection or discussion

1. Has your Christian faith ever cost you?
2. Do you “pray big”—i.e. ask for things that have no chance of happening without divine intervention?
3. Have you seen an answered prayer that seemed to especially glorify God (not just help you)?
4. What are you most quickly frustrated by?
5. Have you ever, in hindsight, realized that God doing nothing in response to a prayer was the right thing for that situation?