

INTO THE CHAOS

SERIES: EXODUS - JOURNEY TO
FREEDOM



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Exodus 13:17-14:31
Tenth Message
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Exodus 13:17-14:31

In the movie *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*, Butch and Sundance, fleeing from the law, are pinned against a cliff. Outnumbered by lawmen who have taken up their positions, there is no way out. They get ready to shoot it out, but they know they won't survive.

Then Butch looks out over the cliff, sees the river below, and says, "No, we'll jump!" Sundance thinks he's crazy. Butch impresses upon him that it's their only hope. Nevertheless, Sundance is reluctant. Butch assures Sundance that the lawmen would never follow them, saying, "Would you make a jump like that you didn't have to?" Sundance: "I have to, and I'm not going to."

Finally, Sundance gives the reason for his reluctance: "I can't swim." Butch laughs hysterically and retorts, "Are you kidding? The fall will probably kill you!" But Sundance knows he's out of options, and though he can't swim, he jumps.

There comes a time when you can't go back and you can't stay where you are. What then?

Exodus 11:1-13:16 records Israel's liberation from Egypt by means of ten plagues, culminating in the tenth plague, the plague of the firstborn. Free from Egypt, the Israelites begin their journey to meet the Lord in the wilderness, with the Lord leading the way. But the manner of the Lord's leading strikes them, and us, as strange, even beyond strange.

And are they really free from Egypt?

Inefficient leading

Exodus 13:17-22:

When Pharaoh let the people go, God did not lead them by way of the land of the Philistines, although that was near. For God said, "Lest the people change their minds when they see war and return to Egypt." 18 But God led the people around by the way of the wilderness

toward the Red Sea. And the people of Israel went up out of the land of Egypt equipped for battle. 19 Moses took the bones of Joseph with him, for Joseph had made the sons of Israel solemnly swear, saying, "God will surely visit you, and you shall carry up my bones with you from here." 20 And they moved on from Succoth and encamped at Etham, on the edge of the wilderness. 21 And the Lord went before them by day in a pillar of cloud to lead them along the way, and by night in a pillar of fire to give them light, that they might travel by day and by night. 22 The pillar of cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night did not depart from before the people.

God doesn't lead the Israelites along the quickest route, which is the way of the land of the Philistines. Instead, he leads them to take the long way around, because they were not ready for war and the way of the Philistines was guarded by Egyptian garrisons.

As God leads the Israelites by a different route, they march in martial array. They march as an army. They will fight one day, but not today. For now, Israel is an army in training. God will lead the Israelites into battle when they're ready. This army in training still has one more important training exercise by the shores of the sea, where its warriors will learn that the battle belongs to the Lord.

The faith of one man, Joseph, sustained an entire nation for more than four hundred years. Joseph believed God's promises to bring the people back to the land of Canaan. His bones, which he instructed to be carried into the promised land once the Lord fulfilled his promise, served as a constant reminder of God's promise. Joseph's bones serve as a tangible reminder that God will bring the people into the land that he has promised them, especially when they face seemingly insurmountable obstacles.

It is poetic indeed that Moses, God's answer to Joseph's faith, who would lead the people out of Egypt to the brink of the promised land, is the one who carries

the bones of Joseph. The faith of one person can have a huge impact. Our faith can bless others in mighty ways—even when we're dead!

The Lord leads the people by means of a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night. This is clear, unmistakable leading. The fact that his leading is clear confirms that it is from him. This strange leading is clearly from him. To the people, it probably just seems clearly strange.

If you're planning to drive someplace and you open an app that gives you some options, don't you almost always choose the fastest route, the one that's bluest? Who chooses the slowest route, the one that's the reddest?

As you make your way through life, does it ever seem as if you're on the slowest route?

Next, the Lord leads the Israelites to the shore of the sea.

Aimless leading

Exodus 14:1-4:

Then the Lord said to Moses, 2 "Tell the people of Israel to turn back and encamp in front of Pi-hahiroth, between Migdol and the sea, in front of Baal-zephon; you shall encamp facing it, by the sea. 3 For Pharaoh will say of the people of Israel, 'They are wandering in the land; the wilderness has shut them in.' 4 And I will harden Pharaoh's heart, and he will pursue them, and I will get glory over Pharaoh and all his host, and the Egyptians shall know that I am the Lord." And they did so.

The Lord, after leading the Israelites away from the quickest way, now has the people wander in what seems like an aimless manner. He even has them turn back into Egyptian territory. Then he has them camp by the sea. He leads them to a dead end! This was so that their wandering would appear aimless to Pharaoh. No doubt it also appears aimless to the Israelites.

As you make your way through life, does it ever seem to you as if you're wandering aimlessly? Going in circles? Running into dead ends?

The wanderings of the Israelites have caught Pharaoh's attention.

Pharaoh pursues

Exodus 14:5-9:

When the king of Egypt was told that the people had fled, the mind of Pharaoh and his servants was changed toward the people, and they said, "What is this we have done, that we have let Israel go from serving us?" 6 So he made ready his chariot and took his army with him, 7 and took six hundred chosen chariots and all the other chariots of Egypt with officers over all of them. 8 And the Lord hardened the heart of Pharaoh king of Egypt, and he pursued the people of Israel while the people of Israel were going out defiantly. 9 The Egyptians pursued them, all Pharaoh's horses and chariots and his horsemen and his army, and overtook them encamped at the sea, by Pi-hahiroth, in front of Baal-zephon.

Pharaoh is obsessive about control. He forgets all the misery that trying to hold onto the Israelites brought him, and he chases after them. This is the move of a desperate man, who has no ability to let go of something that he incorrectly deems crucial to life.

He would profit by letting Israel go, but he chooses the self-destructive way, because holding onto Israel is all he knows. In hardening Pharaoh's heart, the Lord, once again, is simply giving Pharaoh what he wants.

There are people in this world who, like Pharaoh, seek to control people and take the place of God in their lives. They cannot accept defeat. They cannot take the blame. They can't let go. There's probably a little bit of Pharaoh in all of us.

Having pursued the Israelites, Pharaoh and his army close in.

Disastrous leading

Exodus 14:10-12:

When Pharaoh drew near, the people of Israel lifted up their eyes, and behold, the Egyptians were marching after them, and they feared greatly. And the people of Israel cried out to the Lord. 11 They said to Moses, "Is it because there are no graves in Egypt that you have taken us away to die in the wilderness? What have you done to us in bringing us out

of Egypt? 12 Is not this what we said to you in Egypt: ‘Leave us alone that we may serve the Egyptians’? For it would have been better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die in the wilderness.”

As Pharaoh’s army draws near, the people are overtaken by fear. Sometimes, the past chases after you and haunts you like a bad dream. Pharaoh has marshaled the best of his forces, and he has the people pinned against the sea. The people blame Moses for their predicament. They reason that if he had never led them out of Egypt, they wouldn’t be on the verge of death.

The people now think that it would have been better if Moses had simply left them alone, in bondage to the Egyptians, a sentiment they had expressed earlier (Exodus 5:21). This is not exactly in the spirit of Patrick Henry’s “Give me liberty or give me death.” They’d rather be slaves than dead.

Nevertheless, the narrator leaves no doubt: the Lord has led them to this place.

As you make your way through life, does it ever seem as if you’re walking into a disaster that you can’t escape?

Could it be?

Does the Lord’s leading sometimes seem inefficient, aimless, even disastrous? If you’ve tried to follow him, have you ever wondered, “Are you really leading me?”

Could it be, if you’re not making the progress you’d like, that Lord is leading you nevertheless and he knows what you’re ready for and what you’re not ready for? Could it be, if it seems as if you’re wandering aimlessly, that the old saying is true: “God draws straight with crooked lines”? Could it be, if it seems that disaster looms and there’s no way out, that the song is true: “God will make a way / Where there seems to be no way”?

Could it be that the Lord is really leading you after all?

No, we have neither a pillar of cloud by day nor a pillar of fire by night to lead us. That’s because we now have the Holy Spirit to lead us.

Moses is caught between his people, who castigate his leadership, and the Egyptians, who seem poised to destroy the Israelites.

Watch and listen

Exodus 14:13-14:

And Moses said to the people, “Fear not, stand firm, and see the salvation of the Lord, which he will work for you today. For the Egyptians whom you see today, you shall never see again. 14 The Lord will fight for you, and you have only to be silent.”

Speaking into the fear of the people, Moses tells them to “see” and to “be silent,” so that they can hear. See and hear what? The salvation of the Lord. The Israelites fear the Egyptians, who seem poised to destroy them. Moses, however, tells them they will never see the Egyptians again. He doesn’t tell them how this will happen. Moses himself may not know.

Watch. Listen. Pay attention. Pay attention to what the Lord does.

Why does the Lord lead us in seemingly inefficient, aimless, and even disastrous ways, sometimes to places where we feel hemmed in, where there’s no way out? In this story, watch what the Lord does.

Suicidal leading

Exodus 14:15:

The Lord said to Moses, “Why do you cry to me? Tell the people of Israel to go forward.

If the Lord’s leading has seemed inefficient, aimless, and even disastrous, his leading at this point comes off as suicidal. The Lord tells Moses to command the people to “go forward.” Go forward into what? What do the Israelites see when they look forward? Nothing but water. The sea. By all appearances, the Lord is commanding them to walk forward into a watery grave.

However, because they are being pursued by the Egyptians, they are almost out of options. The Lord has led them to a place where virtually their only option is to trust him. The alternative is death at the hand of the Egyptians. The Lord’s alternative is seemingly death by drowning, but at least the Lord’s way offers a glimmer of hope.

The Lord tells Moses, “Why do you cry out to me?” The pronoun “you” is singular, which would seem to be a reference to Moses. But elsewhere in the narrative the

singular has been used to indicate an entire people, and the narrator has already reported that the people cried out to the Lord without mentioning that Moses cried out, so this is likely a reference to the cry of the people.

What are they crying out for? Evidently, they are crying out for the Lord to save them. However, the Lord tells them in so many words to stop crying out. Instead, he tells them to go forward. They want the Lord to save them; the Lord wants them to go forward.

Consuming obsession

Don Hudson, a college professor, writes about his hesitancy to go forward:

For years I pretended I was adequate. But I was playing a game. There were, in my past, devastating circumstances that told me I was deficient. To admit such a deficiency, however, meant death for me. Even though I felt inadequate in everything, I put up a competent front

I hesitated to get married, have children, or develop significant friendships All my inadequacies convinced me I was not up to the task

I believed that the day I would be a man would be the day I felt adequate—the day all my deficiencies were gone. Indeed, my most consuming obsession in life was to conquer my inadequacy. Then I could be the man I always dreamed of being

All my life, I desired—I begged—God to remove the chaos of my world so I could become a man. I wanted him to flip a switch in my soul so I could change. I would not move forward in my world until I felt adequate.¹

Wow! Is that your story? That's my story anyway, at least in part.

Like the Israelites, Don Hudson cried out to the Lord, in his case to remove the chaos of his world, but the Lord did not answer his prayer. Can we move forward even if we feel inadequate, even if God doesn't remove the chaos from our world, even if he doesn't flip a switch in our souls?

Step into the chaos

To Israelites and other the ancients, the sea meant chaos. We look out at life, and it looks like chaos. We can't make sense of it. It's confusing. We wonder if we'll get swallowed up by the chaos if we move forward into it.

We cry, "Lord, save me!" He says, "Go forward!"

The Lord will lead us to places where we are seemingly hemmed in, where all our solutions have failed. There comes a time when you can't go back and you can't stay where you are. The Lord leaves you with almost no choice but to go forward—into the chaos. You almost have no choice, like Butch and Sundance.

I shared a few weeks ago that years ago I was fired as the editor of the weekly newspaper in Los Gatos. I couldn't go back. I couldn't stay where I was. I had to go forward. I didn't want to leave. I didn't want to look for another job. But the Lord left me with virtually no other choice.

What's the chaos in your life? Is it financial? Familial? Relational? Vocational? Are you looking out at what seems like a chaotic sea of expectations that you have no idea how to meet? Is everything chaotic?

Step into the chaos. Move forward without knowing what will happen. Move forward without the answers. Move toward her. Move toward him. Move toward them.

Afraid? Listen to Larry Crabb:

"We realize there is no code to follow in the arenas we determine to enter. But it also creates a sense of anticipation God gives courage: not the sort that stills trembling legs but the kind that helps us move forward on them."²

The Lord continues his instructions to Moses.

The sea will part

Exodus 14:16-18:

Lift up your staff, and stretch out your hand over the sea and divide it, that the people of Israel may go through the sea on dry ground. 17 And I will harden the hearts of the Egyptians so that they shall go in after them, and I will get glory over Pharaoh and all his host, his chariots, and his horsemen. 18 And the Egyptians shall know that I am the Lord, when I have gotten glory over Pharaoh, his chariots, and his horsemen."

Earlier, we saw how the faith of Joseph sustained the nation. Now we see how the faith of another man, Moses, sustains the nation. As Moses acts in dependence

on the Lord, the sea will part and the nation will pass through it. Each person's faith makes a difference in other people's lives.

The Lord keeps promising that the Egyptians will pursue the Israelites, and he keeps speaking of it as if it's good news. The Egyptians don't know it, but they are pursuing the Israelites so that the Lord may be glorified. Three times in the overall narrative the Lord says he will be glorified.

The Lord protects

Exodus 14:19-20:

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, 20 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.

As the angel of God and the pillar move to block the progress of the Egyptians, the Lord, who has led his people to this place, now protects them. The Lord, who earlier lured the Egyptians into pursuing the Israelites, now blocks their progress.

Dry land appears

Exodus 14:21-23:

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. 22 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. 23 The Egyptians pursued and went in after them into the midst of the sea, all Pharaoh's horses, his chariots, and his horsemen.

The Lord does seem to have a penchant for waiting until the eleventh hour to come through. Finally, he divides the waters, and dry land appears. In the middle of the chaos of the sea, solid ground appears.

The Israelites walk through the sea on dry land, not mushy land. The sea becomes like a wall on either side,

but the Lord does not take away the sea. All he does is give the Israelites some solid ground to walk on through the sea.

Even though the Israelites walk on dry land, it still takes faith for them to do so, because who knows if the walls of water will collapse? Then again, if they turn back, they'll run into the Egyptians, who are now in headlong pursuit. The Lord had been holding the Egyptians back, but now they're closing in again.

The Egyptians panic

Exodus 14:24-25:

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, 25 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."

In the middle of the sea of chaos, who is it that is confused? Not the Israelites but the Egyptians. The Lord confuses the Egyptians as they pursue the Israelites into the sea. Being confused, the Egyptians flee, recognizing that they are in over their heads, literally and figuratively.

Like their magicians before them, the Egyptians recognize that they're fighting a losing battle against the Lord, the God of the Israelites.

The waters return

Exodus 14:26-29:

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." 27 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. 28 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. 29 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.

Pharaoh takes his best shot, using his best men and his best chariots, and he's utterly defeated.

The panicked Egyptians who said that "the Lord fights for them" would not have also said, as the waters of judgment crashed around them, "All religions are the same." They would not have said, "It doesn't matter what you believe as long as you're a good person." They would not have said, "You do you." The meaning of their confession in the middle of the sea is this: you must worship the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, now revealed in Jesus Christ, or you will perish.

The verb "return" plays an important part in the narrative. God led Israelites so that they would not be tempted to "return" to Egypt (Exodus 13:17). Now, there is no possibility of returning because the waters have "returned."

God will make a way

In the middle of the chaos of our lives, God creates solid ground. The Lord doesn't remove the chaos; he just gives us some solid ground to walk on through the chaos.

When you step into the chaos, you know you can't control it. That's one of the reasons you don't step into it in the first place. Then once you're in the chaos, it can feel as if you're walking through walls of water that could collapse on you at any minute.

You know you can't hold back the water. Only God can hold back the water. So, when you enter the chaos, you are highly motivated to trust him! As Brian Morgan, a pastor at PBC Cupertino observes, "These waters cannot be negotiated without divine aid."³

In spite of this

Don Hudson was unable to conquer his feelings of inadequacy. And it's good that he didn't, because when he thought his month-old son might be dying, something began to shift inside. Soon afterward, he wrote about the kind of story he wants to tell once his life on this version of earth is over:

My story will not be about a God who removed the chaos of my life. My story will be, in essence, that in spite of this—and in spite of all the obstacles, confusion, and fears—I trusted God. I will say that he never took away my insecurities, but by his grace I found the courage to trust him anyway. And look what he did through

me! Can you believe it? He used my weaknesses—all of them—to bring glory to himself.⁴

I hope to tell that kind of story also. How about you?

Step into the chaos, even on trembling legs, and God will make a way.

Why does the Lord lead us in seemingly inefficient, aimless, disastrous, and even suicidal ways, sometimes to places where there's no way out? So that we can step forward into the chaos and watch him make a way through the chaos.

Then what?

New kind of fear

Exodus 14:30-31:

Thus the Lord saved Israel that day from the hand of the Egyptians, and Israel saw the Egyptians dead on the seashore. 31 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.

Remember, Moses told the people to "see" and to "be silent" so that they could see and hear the salvation of the Lord. Twice the verb "see" is used in these verses. The people "saw" the dead Egyptians who were washed up on the seashore. They also "saw" the great power of the Lord. Moreover, because they were told to be silent, they could also hear, especially as the walls of water collapsed. They saw and heard the Lord's salvation.

If it hadn't been for the Lord's seemingly strange leading of them, they wouldn't have seen and heard the powerful salvation of the Lord.

And seeing and hearing the powerful salvation of the Lord, what happened to the people? They "feared the Lord, and they believed in the Lord." Because they saw and heard, or because they perceived, they believed.

The last time the narrator reported that the Israelites believed was way back in Exodus 4:31, when Moses first returned from the wilderness and announced the Lord's plan to deliver them. Since then, they've excoriated Moses, the Lord's representative, because things went from bad to worse and because Moses led them to what they perceived to be a dead end, literally. Although they

believed earlier, there is even more reason for faith now. Because of all the twists and turns and stops and starts, there is every opportunity for deeper faith.

Earlier, when the Egyptians were closing in, the Israelites “feared greatly.” Moses, however, told them to “fear not.” After seeing the power of the Lord, they “feared the Lord.” The Israelites’ trembling fear of Egypt has been replaced by a holy fear of the Lord. Notice the progression: they go forward, they see, they believe.

Step. See. Believe. Step into the chaos, see the power of the Lord, and believe in the Lord.

New creation

The Lord’s deliverance of the Israelites echoes his work in creation. In creation, God said, “Let the waters under the heavens be gathered together into one place, and let the dry land appear” for the first humans (Genesis 1:9). Once again, the Lord drives back the waters, gathers them together, and dry ground appears—this time for Israel, his people.

When you put your faith in Christ, you are baptized into Christ—first spiritually and second physically (Romans 6:3-4, Galatians 3:27). Like the Israelites of old, you go through the water, and you come out “a new creation” (2 Corinthians 5:17).

In John’s vision of the new creation, there is no sea—not that there won’t be any sea (for those of you who like the ocean) but that there will be no more of what the sea symbolizes: chaos (Revelation 21:1).

Thanks be to God

Spoiler alert: Butch and Sundance survived their jump, even though Sundance couldn’t swim and even though he clung to Butch for dear life and almost caused him to drown.

The apostle Paul, who experienced the strange leading of the Lord and ran into apparent dead ends on many occasions, could say, as a minister of the new covenant, “But thanks be to God, who in Christ always leads us in triumphal procession, and through us spreads the fragrance of the knowledge of him everywhere” (2 Corinthians 2:14).

Indeed, thanks be to God. Step into the chaos, and the Lord will make a way.

Endnotes

- 1 Larry Crabb, *The Silence of Adam* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House), 184-88.
- 2 Crabb, 102.
- 3 Brian Morgan, “Footsteps on the Sea,” Peninsula Bible Church Cupertino (November 21, 2004).
- 4 Crabb, 184-88.