

Exodus 14:15-31

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The last section of this chapter (verses 15 – 31) contain one of the most well-known stories of the Bible – the crossing of the Red Sea. It starts with the LORD giving instructions that prepare the Israelites for the crossing (15 – 18). Then, in verses 19 – 20, the angel of the LORD, appearing as a cloud, moved to a position protecting the Israelites from the Egyptians. Verses 21 – 25 relate the dividing of the Red Sea waters and the crossing of the Israelites on dry land. Once across, the LORD caused the Red Sea to fall upon the pursuing Egyptians, killing the best of Pharaoh’s army (26-29). The last part of this section (30 – 31) is a summary of this wonderful deliverance by the LORD and the response of the grateful Israelites.

In order to shake the Israelites out their paralyzing fear, *the Lord said to Moses, “Why are you crying out to Me? We are told that the people, not Moses, cried out to the LORD. There could have been a prayer of Moses that is not recorded here. This question seems to be a call to action. Instead of sitting and fretting (and crying out), Moses was to tell the sons of Israel to go forward. To “go forward” meant to begin walking to the Red Sea.*

In verse 16, the phrase *as for you* is emphatic, signifying that Moses had a special job to do. He was told to *lift up your staff and stretch out your hand over the sea and divide it, and the sons of Israel shall go through the midst of the sea on dry land.* The LORD also had something to do. He said, *as for Me* (once again emphatic), *behold, I will harden the hearts of the Egyptians so that they will go in after them.* In other words, the LORD would cause the hearts to be so obsessed with fulfilling their desire to catch the Israelites that they would follow them across the divided sea.

Through His workings, *God will be honored through Pharaoh and all his army, through his chariots and his horsemen.* Pharaoh’s defeat would be total. Most, if not all, of the Egyptian army present at the Red Sea were going to be annihilated and the Israelites would not have to lift a finger to fight. The battle is the LORD’s, and He was going to be *honored* by demonstrating His power over one of the most powerful armies on earth. The result would be that *the Egyptians will know that I am the Lord, when I am honored through Pharaoh, through his chariots and his horsemen.* On the basis of what was about to

happen to them, they would have to honor the LORD as the one who won the victory.

Furthermore, *the angel of God, who had been going before the camp of Israel, moved and went behind them.* Whether the “angel of God” is the LORD Himself or an angelic being is unclear. Either way, the LORD’s powerful presence is with Israel. The “angel” was seen as a *pillar of cloud*. Some have said that there were two pillars, one being a dark cloud and the other being a pillar of fire. It could also be that it was one cloud that changed from dark cloud to fire when necessary.

In preparation for the Red Sea crossing, *the cloud moved from before them and stood behind them.* The cloud moved in such a way that *it came between the camp of Egypt and the camp of Israel.* By moving from in front of the Israelites to their back, the pillar changed from being a guide to a defender. The change in the cloud’s position meant that *there was the cloud along with the darkness.*

The Hebrew reads “and there was the cloud and the darkness,” giving the impression that the darkness was deeper than it would have been normally. However, *it gave light at night.* This implies that the cloud intensified the darkness and gloominess for the Egyptians and at the same time gave light to the Israelites. This was yet another miraculous work of the LORD – a cloud that can be darkness and light at the same time. This is a picture of the LORD’s presence bringing both judgment and salvation. Because the cloud was between the camps, *the one camp did not come near the other all night.*

It could be that the exceeding darkness on the Egyptian side shielded the Egyptians from seeing the pillar of fire. This might have prevented them from realizing the presence of God, lest they realize the same God that judged them with the plagues was now present with the Israelites. It could also have shielded them from seeing that the LORD was drying a pathway and piling up water.

The parting of the Red Sea began when *Moses stretched out his hand over the sea.* Though Moses was allowed to participate in its parting, it was the LORD’s power that made it happen. Raising his hand over the sea was a visible demonstration that the LORD was going to work through Moses to accomplish His will for Israel.

The location of the Red Sea has been disputed over the years. The Hebrew (*yam suph*) can also be translated “Reed Sea,” and several places have been

suggested. Wherever it was, it had to be deep enough to form a wall on both sides of the dry land tall enough to drown the Egyptians (14:28). That could mean something like ten feet of water, so it would not have had to be very high to do the job.

In response to Moses' actions, *the Lord swept the sea back by a strong east wind all night and turned the sea into dry land*. The text is quite clear that while the LORD used nature to accomplish His will, it was He who performed the act of parting the sea. This was no happenstance. God directed an east wind to do His bidding by blowing all night.

The result of the "strong east wind" blowing all night was that *the waters were divided*. The LORD held back the waters so that *the sons of Israel went through the midst of the sea on the dry land*. One question that arises here is how could an estimated two million Israelites cross the Red Sea during that night (6 – 8 hours)? Some have argued that it could have been done if the gap in the sea was at least a half a mile wide, probably wider. The fact that they walked on dry land is testimony to the awesome power of the LORD over nature. It is also a polemic against the god of the sea worshipped by many in the Ancient Near East, including the Canaanites.

Another demonstration of the LORD's power was that *the waters were like a wall to them on their right hand and on their left*. The words "were like" are not in the Hebrew – it simply reads "the waters [were] a wall to them." Just like walls around a city, the walls of water were barriers on each side.

Verses 23 – 31 describe the destruction of the Egyptian army. When they saw that the Israelites had made it to the other side of the Red Sea, *the Egyptians took up the pursuit, and all Pharaoh's horses, his chariots and his horsemen went in after them into the midst of the sea*. All aspects of the Egyptian military force were involved in the pursuit. The fact that the Egyptians pursued supports the notion of a wide dry area. In the pre-dawn light a wide area would mean the walls of water on either side would likely not be readily observable. A hypothetical ten foot wall of water would likely not look foreboding if it was quarter mile away and in dim light.

The Egyptians obviously were confident that they could catch up with the Israelites. It is inferred that at some point the deep darkness shielding the Egyptians from the Israelites was removed. Presumably God allowed the Egyptians sufficient light to see Israel fleeing. Perhaps God shielded the Egyptians from being able to see the water parted as well as shielding them from seeing the fire in the cloud that was observable to Israel. This could have

been a significant part of hardening their heart, shielding them from seeing the Lord at work bending nature to His will. The Egyptians might have suddenly been able to see Israel on the move in dim light, and not suspected any divine activity. But then, things began to change. It was *at the morning watch* (sometime between 3:00 a.m. and dawn), *the Lord looked down on the army of the Egyptians through the pillar of fire and cloud and brought the army of the Egyptians into confusion.* The text says that “the LORD looked down.” This is an anthropomorphism because everything is always and constantly visible to Him. It is used several times in the Scriptures and is always associated with His interpersonal dealings with humans ([Deuteronomy 26:15](#); [Job 40:12](#); [Psalms 14:2, 53:2, 80:14, 102:19, Isaiah 63:15](#)). Also, for Him to look “through the pillar of fire and cloud” showed that the pillar was a visible indication of His presence.

When the LORD “saw” what the Egyptians were doing, *He caused their chariot wheels to swerve, and He made them drive with difficulty.* Without the chariots working properly, the brunt of Egypt’s military forces was rendered impotent. How He did this is not described here, but [Psalms 77:16-19](#) may describe how the LORD used rain, thunder, lightning, and earthquakes to discourage the Egyptians from pursuing the Israelites. It worked, because *the Egyptians said, “Let us flee from Israel, for the Lord is fighting for them against the Egyptians.”* Even the Egyptians realized that the God of Israel was causing their “difficulty” and that they and their gods could do nothing to overcome Him. The LORD apparently shielded His intervention from Egypt so they would follow their hearts to re-enslave Israel, but not reveals that He is, indeed, fighting for Israel.

The worst was yet to come for the Egyptians, however, because *the Lord said to Moses, “Stretch out your hand over the sea so that the waters may come back over the Egyptians, over their chariots and their horsemen.”* In obedience, *Moses stretched out his hand over the sea, and the sea returned to its normal state at daybreak, while the Egyptians were fleeing right into it.* The same gesture that caused the waters to divide in verse 21 now caused the waters to flow over the Egyptian forces. That this happened “at daybreak” shows that all of the Israelites crossed the Red Sea during the night. It also shows that the Egyptians started pursuing Israel in dim lighting. Plus, the waters fell upon the Egyptians in such a way that prevented any avenue of escape.

Their attempt to “flee” led them directly into the waters as they “returned to their normal state.” The result was that *the Lord overthrew the Egyptians in the midst of the sea.* That which they revered as a god was used by the LORD

to judge them. Verse 28 summarizes what happened. *The waters returned and covered the chariots and the horsemen, even Pharaoh's entire army that had gone into the sea after them; not even one of them remained.* Pharaoh's army was obliterated without Israel having to do any combat with them. The salvation of Israel and the destruction of Egypt's army were both completely the LORD's work. We are not told how deep the water was that covered the chariots. But with military men armed for war driving in armored chariots, it likely would not have to be particularly deep to drown them all.

The text does not say if Pharaoh was also killed in the Red Sea. The passages that recount this event do not say if Pharaoh perished either ([Psalms 106:7-12](#), [136:13-15](#)).

In order to emphasize the contrast between the fate of the Egyptians and of the Israelites, it was repeated here that *the sons of Israel walked on dry land through the midst of the sea, and the waters were like a wall to them on their right hand and on their left.* Notice the contrasts here. Not one Israelite perished – not one Egyptian who pursued them survived. Judgment came upon Egypt, and deliverance came to the LORD's covenant people.

In verse 30 – 31, the account of the crossing of the Red Sea is summed up. The result of the LORD's actions was that He *saved Israel that day from the hand of the Egyptians*, and in order to increase their faith, He made sure that *Israel saw the Egyptians dead on the seashore.* The dead Egyptians were visible proof of the overwhelming victory the LORD won that day and that the LORD would take care of them.

Thus, *When Israel saw the great power which the Lord had used against the Egyptians, the people feared the Lord, and they believed in the Lord and in His servant Moses.* The phrase “the great power” is literally “the great hand.” The hand was a symbol of power, and it had to be “great” to defeat the powerful Egyptians.

The resulting fear the Israelites had was really being awestruck by His Works. The story begins with the Israelites being afraid of the Egyptians, and ends with them fearing the Lord. Fear is a basic human driver. However, we as humans get to choose what we fear most. The scripture tells us that the beginning of wisdom is to fear the Lord ([Psalms 111:10](#)). In this case the Israelites learned to fear God over the Egyptians because they also “believed in the LORD”; they had just seen that He would do what He said He was going to do. However, as we will see, this lesson will fade. Choosing whom to fear is a choice we must make each day.

On top of believing in God, at this point they believed in Moses. Earlier, they thought he was misleading them, but now everything that Moses predicted came to pass. This is the first time that Moses is called “His servant.” There is no greater title for a human to have than “servant of the LORD.” As we shall see, this too will fade in time. Each human must also choose each day who or what to trust.

This passage demonstrates that the LORD guided Israel to a place where there was no way out other than a miracle. He did this as a witness to both the Egyptians as well as the Israelites. His presence was simultaneously darkness and judgment to the Egyptians and light and deliverance to Israel. No matter how desperate the circumstances, the LORD is sovereign and able to deliver us, even though our deliverance does not always take the form we would choose. God is both justice and mercy. In this case he judged the Egyptians by orchestrating circumstances such that the Egyptians were judged by pursuing their passion to enslave Israel. God was also merciful in delivering Israel even though their faith was weak.

Biblical Text:

¹⁵ Then the Lord said to Moses, “Why are you crying out to Me? Tell the sons of Israel to go forward. ¹⁶ As for you, lift up your staff and stretch out your hand over the sea and divide it, and the sons of Israel shall go through the midst of the sea on dry land. ¹⁷ As for Me, behold, I will harden the hearts of the Egyptians so that they will go in after them; and I will be honored through Pharaoh and all his army, through his chariots and his horsemen. ¹⁸ Then the Egyptians will know that I am the Lord, when I am honored through Pharaoh, through his chariots and his horsemen.”

¹⁹ The angel of God, who had been going before the camp of Israel, moved and went behind them; and the pillar of cloud moved from before them and stood behind them. ²⁰ So it came between the camp of Egypt and the camp of Israel; and there was the cloud along with the darkness, yet it gave light at night. Thus the one did not come near the other all night.

²¹ Then Moses stretched out his hand over the sea; and the Lord swept the sea *back* by a strong east wind all night and turned the sea into dry land, so the waters were divided. ²² The sons of Israel went through the midst of the sea on the dry land, and the waters *were like* a wall to them on their right hand and on their left. ²³ Then the Egyptians took up the

pursuit, and all Pharaoh's horses, his chariots and his horsemen went in after them into the midst of the sea. ²⁴ At the morning watch, the Lord looked down on the army of the Egyptians through the pillar of fire and cloud and brought the army of the Egyptians into confusion. ²⁵ He caused their chariot wheels to swerve, and He made them drive with difficulty; so the Egyptians said, "Let us flee from Israel, for the Lord is fighting for them against the Egyptians."

²⁶ Then the Lord said to Moses, "Stretch out your hand over the sea so that the waters may come back over the Egyptians, over their chariots and their horsemen." ²⁷ So Moses stretched out his hand over the sea, and the sea returned to its normal state at daybreak, while the Egyptians were fleeing right into it; then the Lord overthrew the Egyptians in the midst of the sea. ²⁸ The waters returned and covered the chariots and the horsemen, even Pharaoh's entire army that had gone into the sea after them; not even one of them remained. ²⁹ But the sons of Israel walked on dry land through the midst of the sea, and the waters *were like* a wall to them on their right hand and on their left.

³⁰ Thus the Lord saved Israel that day from the hand of the Egyptians, and Israel saw the Egyptians dead on the seashore. ³¹ When Israel saw the great power which the Lord had used against the Egyptians, the people feared the Lord, and they believed in the Lord and in His servant Moses.