

## Be Still, My Soul

By Brad Allison on 8/10/2003

Scripture Reference *Exodus 14*

The standard approach to this passage about the crossing of the Red Sea is to see it as helping us know what to do when we feel ourselves to be between a rock and a hard place. It is true that Israel was in just such a place, with the army of Egypt pursuing them on one side and the Red Sea on the other side. It is also true that we often find ourselves in just such circumstances in our lives. A job is lost and there doesn't seem to be another one on the horizon. A child gets sick with a serious disease, a spouse announces she doesn't love you any longer and she wants a divorce. To be in circumstances like these feels exactly like the Israelites felt—trapped with no obvious way out.

Though this passage certainly does apply to the situation in which you feel yourself to be up against the wall, its primary thrust relates to the difficulty of making a break with your old masters. Remember that one of the chief themes of this book is to answer the question of whom you're going to serve. In the case of Israel, would they serve Pharaoh or Jehovah? The book moves from the harsh service of Pharaoh in Egypt to the liberated service of God in the wilderness tabernacle. The word "serve" is used to describe both the service of Pharaoh and the worship of God. It became Moses' plea to Pharaoh, to let the people go so they could serve God in the wilderness. As we've seen before, the message of Exodus, and of the entire Bible, is that everyone has to serve somebody. Israel has now come out from serving Pharaoh, and their old master doesn't intend on letting them go. So he musters his entire army. There are no less than fourteen references in chapters 14-15 to "every chariot" of Pharaoh's. The chariot was the most intimidating instrument of war in that day, providing the charioteer with speed and an elevated angle to fight "downhill." In addition, Pharaoh brought with him every horseman in the Egyptian army. Essentially the entire army of the most powerful nation on earth was after the Israelites. And their intended purpose was not the recapture of the Israelites, but their destruction. The goal of the Egyptians was nothing less than genocide, as seen in 15:9 where we read that the enemy said, "I will draw my sword; my hand shall destroy them."

In order to appreciate what this passage is about, then, we need to think of our old masters. They are the masters who don't want to let us go, who say that if we try to escape them, they will slaughter us. Who are your old masters? For some of you, it's alcohol. For others, it may be money or success or the ever elusive perfectly sculpted body or the even more elusive perfect child. Let me tell you what one of my old gods is. It's an image of masculinity that says a real man is always strong and never needy. He is omni-competent, always right, hard-working, a good provider and able to handle with ease and grace any difficulty that comes along. It is when the power of this old master, this idol, is threatened that I feel like the Israelites felt here. What do I do when this image of masculinity is threatened, when instead of being strong it becomes apparent that I am weak? So here's what this passage is about. It describes the situation when we are between a rock and hard place in our lives that threatens an old master like Egypt. It is not just something like losing a job, but losing a job for the person whose identity was wrapped up with having a job. It's not just losing a husband to divorce, it's losing a husband to divorce in the case of a woman whose entire life was centered around her identity as a wife. When we are threatened with the loss of these kinds of things, it feels like death. What do we do in these situations?

Moses' words to the Israelites give us the answer to this. As they attempted to escape their old master and found themselves between a rock and a hard place, Moses told them, "Fear not, stand firm, and see the salvation of the Lord" (14:13). These are the same words God speaks to us in our daily struggle to escape our old masters and serve the true and living God.

Let's look now at each one.

## I. Fear Not

It's not hard to understand why the Israelites were battling fear here. They had come upon a roadblock in the form of the Red Sea, and now they saw that the entire army of Egypt was hot on their trail. Furthermore, it was the God they had come out here to serve who had led them into this predicament. All they had been doing was following the pillar of fire, and he had led them right into this trap. On top of everything else, it was nighttime, and we all know how the middle of the night tends to amplify our fears instead of quiet them.

Though their fears are understandable, they are also quite destructive. Like all fears except the fear of the Lord, our fears inevitably lead us to do the wrong thing. Notice how the Israelites' fears distorted things for them. After spotting the approaching Egyptian army, they said to Moses, "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" (v. 12). They actually hadn't said that at all. Their response to Moses after he showed up is recorded back in 4:31. "And the people believed, and when they heard that the Lord had visited the people of Israel and that he had seen their affliction, they bowed their heads and worshiped." Now their fears were leading them right back into slavery. That's the way it is with our fears. The single person who fears singleness inevitably does all the wrong things. His insecurities and fears lead him to do the very things that will keep him single. The wife who fears her husband's rejection will do the very things that will make it harder for him to love her and accept her.

What is the answer to our fears? We have an advantage here over the Israelites, because we can see the big picture of what God is doing. The answer to our fears is to trust God, and one of the things that helps us to trust God is to know and believe that he knows what he's doing. Sometimes it seems that God doesn't know at all what he's doing as he directs our lives. Notice here that an objective observer would have concluded that the Israelites were lost, wandering around in the wilderness until they had trapped themselves against the Red Sea. That's precisely what Pharaoh concluded. How can we trust a God who seems at times to be leading us into traps? We can trust him by believing that he knows what he's doing. If we knew the things he knows, we would make the same decisions he makes. Let me point out three of the things God knows in this passage.

First, he knows the "what ifs" of life. In the previous chapter, we're told that God didn't lead Israel by the natural route into Canaan. God gives us his reason for this: "Lest the people change their minds when they see war and return to Egypt" (13"17). God knew what could have happened, but didn't. He knows not just the actual future, but the potential future. It's not hard to see how such a knowledge would improve decision-making. You're a single person trying to decide if you should marry a particular person, and you could just run the tape of what life would be like twenty years after the wedding. Of course, God doesn't give us that information, but he has it. And he has it for an infinite number of possible futures. God knows the "what ifs" of life.

Further, God knows us, just as he knew Israel here. He knows our tendencies, our weaknesses and our strengths. He knows us perfectly, and makes decisions regarding us out of this perfect knowledge.

Finally, God knows our enemies. He knows Pharaoh here, and he knows exactly what Pharaoh is going to do. In his amazing power and sovereignty, he lets Pharaoh do exactly what

Pharaoh wanted to do, and then uses that to his own glory. That means that all your enemies, including Satan himself, can take their best shot against you, and God will turn it to be for your good.

God can be trusted with our future even if it doesn't make sense to us. And if we trust him, we don't need to be afraid. Most of us are familiar with the scene aboard an airplane as it is taking off. Viewed from one perspective, it's amazing that there is not complete terror on the inside of a plane as it accelerates down a runway. A very large machine is accelerating down a road that will abruptly come to an end. As the end approaches, instead of doing the natural thing and applying the breaks, the pilot does just the opposite and accelerates even more, to speeds in excess of 100 mph. What sheer madness is this? The passengers don't think this madness at all. They know that the pilot knows things that they don't know. He knows how to get this large machine airborne before the end of the runway and to keep it there until arrival at the destination. In the same way, God knows things we don't. When it seems that his plan for us is sheer madness, we can take refuge in knowing that our God can be trusted and that we need not fear.

## II. Stand Firm

The next thing Moses tells the people to do is to stand firm. What kind of advice was this? I'm sure the activists among them wanted a different kind of leader, one who would think quickly under pressure like this and be able to mobilize a plan for the military defense of the nation. Others probably just wanted to head for the hills and scatter, hoping for at least the partial survival of the nation. But standing still—that seems to be the worst possible advice he could have given.

Whenever we face a crisis, our natural tendencies are either to fight or to flee. Fighters want some plan to fix the situation. They're fixers. They go to counselors and pastors looking for the three or four steps to fix the problem. They believe that if they just knew the right things to do and could do them successfully, that all would be taken care of.

The other common strategy is to flee, and the most common form of that is denial. A denier just pretends that he doesn't have a problem. One of our family's favorite movies is called *Strictly Ballroom*, and one of the characters in that movie is always responding to crises by saying, "I must put my happy face on. Look, I've put on my happy face." Another common form of fleeing is to surrender immediately and quickly. This person just gives up and says, "I would never have prevailed there anyway." They often become pessimistic as a means of protecting themselves from future disappointment.

In contrast to fighting or fleeing, God's word to us is to stand firm. In many ways, this is even more difficult than not being fearful. How can we possibly just stand still when all manner of crises are descending upon us? The answer is to know that there is another fighting for us. The reason we don't fight is that someone else, who is a far better fighter than us, is taking up the fight on our behalf. That's what Moses tells the Israelites. They are to stand still and know that "the Lord will fight for you" (v. 14). Standing still and receiving instead of doing is part of the essence of Christianity.

Illustration: Martyn Lloyd Jones was a well-known London preacher who often had opportunity to talk to people about their faith. He would often ask them, "Are you a Christian?" He reports that people frequently responded to that question by saying, "I'm trying to be a Christian." Whenever he heard that, he would explain to them that they were most certainly not Christians, because to say that a person is trying to be a Christian

belies the very heart of Christianity, which rests in what another has done for us. This brings us to our final point.

### III. See the Salvation of the Lord

They were not to achieve their own salvation on this day. They were to be quiet and see someone else achieve it. The account of that salvation is well-known to us all. The cloud of God's presence took up position between Israel and the Egyptian army, casting complete darkness upon the army so they couldn't attack. Moses was instructed to stretch his hand over the sea and divide it. God sent a great wind, with the result that a great wall of water formed on either side and left a dry path on which the Israelites could pass through the water. After they had passed through, they were quickly followed by the Egyptian army, who ended up confused and then drowned in the water that was released upon them.

Like Israel, we are to be still and see the salvation of God. Here's what that's teaching us. Our first need when we feel like we're between a rock and a hard place is not to fix the problem, but to rest in our salvation and the knowledge of God's love for us. There's a great picture in this text of that, and it lies in seeing the meaning behind this phrase that is repeated several times in the passage. It is the phrase that Israel passed through on dry ground. Why would that little detail be mentioned four times in these two chapters? The answer lies in understanding that water is a picture of the judgment of God. Remember that God judged the earth in the days of Noah by sending a flood. He judges the Egyptians here by water as well. Israel passes through the judgment of God, and they don't even get their feet wet. None of his judgment so much as touches them. We learn more about this in something Jesus said. He said, "For just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth" (Matt. 12:40). Jesus entered the waters of judgment and was completely covered by them in order that we might escape them. The result is, in the words of Paul, "There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus" (Ro. 8:1). Think with me about those two words "now" and "no". Right now the condemnation has been permanently removed. Through the salvation brought to us by Jesus, we stand in a position right now wherein we will never get "wet" with God's judgment. Further, there is no condemnation, either for past, present, or future deeds. Whenever we face a Red Sea experience, we are stand still and look at this salvation.

Illustration: Allow me to give an example from my own life this week. About Tuesday of this week, I was feeling just a bit overwhelmed about a particular matter I am facing in my life right now. I spent a pretty restless night on Monday night, and came to the office on Tuesday with the matter still weighing heavily on me. As I was studying this passage on Tuesday afternoon, it occurred to me that I needed to do what Moses was telling the Israelites to do. I needed not to fear, but rather to stand firm and see God's salvation. God's calling to me was not to solve this problem but to rest in his salvation, in his love for me. As I asked God for the grace to do just that, he was faithful to give me such a joyful rest in his salvation. The situation about which I was stewing is still with me, but God has given joy in waiting on him to show up and divide the sea.

Let me say it another way. We are called here to sing the song of deliverance on the west bank of the Red Sea, and not just the east bank. We read in the next chapter of Israel's song after the deliverance, on the east side of the Sea. God calls them to sing the song on the side where the Egyptians are.

## CONCLUSION:

Gladys Aylward was a missionary to China sixty years ago. Her story has been told in a movie called *The Inn of the Sixth Happiness*, starring Ingrid Bergman as Gladys Aylward. The conclusion of the movie is about a time when she led a group of children as they were fleeing from the invading Japanese army. With only one assistant, she led more than a hundred orphans over the mountains toward Free China. In their book *The Hidden Price of Greatness*, Ray Besson and Ranelda Mack Hunsicker tell what happened:

During Gladys's harrowing journey out of war-torn Yangcheng ... she grappled with despair as never before. After passing a sleepless night, she faced the morning with no hope of reaching safety. A 13-year-old girl in the group reminded her of their much-loved story of Moses and the Israelites crossing the Red Sea. "But I am not Moses," Gladys cried in desperation. "Of course you aren't," the girl said, "but Jehovah is still God!"

Indeed he is! We need God's help when we feel trapped by the circumstances of life. May he help us not to fear, but to stand firm and see his salvation!