

EXODUS

THE GOD WHO RESCUES

SESSION OBJECTIVE: EXODUS 14:19-31

To understand more about the parting of the Red Sea.

Read the Text:

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. 21 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. 24 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." 26 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. 30 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. (Exodus 14:19-31, ESV)

Study the Text:

The Chase Comes to a Halt

Following the Israelites' abrupt halt at the edge of the Red Sea "between Migdol" and "in front of Baal-zephon" (Ex. 14:2), the Egyptian armies closed grounds quickly because of their more advanced chariots and well-formed travel tactics as an army (Ex. 14:9). The Israelites, feeling entrapped, cried out to the LORD and He answered them by telling Moses: "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" (Ex. 14:16). Verses 19 through 31 explain the events that follow the Israelites subsequent journey through the parted sea. Below is a breakdown of some key terms and concepts.

THE ANGEL OF GOD

Verse 19 begins by introducing another aspect of the "pillar of cloud" that was introduced in chapter 13. Beyond there being fire inside of the cloud, it also seems as if the cloud is being moved along or guided by "the angel of God." This is the first time in Exodus that the "angel of God" has appeared in a story. At first glance it might be tempting to think that the angel and the cloud are separate where the cloud follows the angel, and while that is technically true it is practically incorrect. It's better to think of it as, "when the angel moves, the cloud moves simultaneously." They are paralleled together. The pillar of cloud and fire are symbolic of Yahweh's leadership, and this physical symbol is moved along by Yahweh's servant, an angel.

A BARRIER

To what end does the angel move the cloud? Verse 20 clarifies this: "...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." The cloud, which had been positioned in front of the Israelites in order to provide leadership, shifts to behind the Israelites in order to provide a barrier of protection between them and the Egyptian army. Ominously, the cloud "lit up the night" as it got darker, presumably because of the fire from within it. One need only imagine for a moment how terrifying this might have been. Pretend for a moment you are in the army of Pharaoh and you have been tasked to chase down the Israelites. You are fueled with rage towards them because of all of the plagues their God has caused on you and your people. You've lost a loved one due to the tenth and final plague. You are moving quickly on your chariot, laughing with vengeance as you quickly approach their trapped position. And as you set up around them and prepare to attack, the evening is quickly approaching, and you see what can only be described as a large storm cloud moving over them, suddenly descending in front of them, and as the night covers the sky, fire blossoms within the cloud, lighting up the night sky. You've never seen anything like this before in your life. Suddenly, the rage and anger and adrenaline dissipates into confusion and fear. Verse 20 indicates that this cloud made it such that neither army attempted to approach the other throughout the entire night. Yahweh protects His people sometimes through force, but sometimes through sheer, terrifying spectacle.

THROUGH THE SEA

During the cover of night and under the protection of the cloud, verse 21 says that 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." It isn't simply that the waters moved; they moved by way of wind. Again, place yourself within the perspective of the Israelites. You are scared for your life, there is a terrifying, fiery cloud that has descended in front of you, preventing the Egyptian armies from attacking, and suddenly a strong eastern wind picks up and blows the water out, creating a path of dry ground through the sea. The Israelites then move through the corridor in the sea with "the waters being a wall to them on their right hand and on their left" (Ex. 14:22). They could presumably see the sea life as it swam by them while they walked through the sea.

CONFUSED

Eventually, the Egyptians attempt to follow the Israelites, "all Pharaoh's horses, his chariots, and his horsemen" (Ex. 14:23). However, while they were traversing the sea corridor, the LORD "threw the Egyptian forces into a panic," and made the wheels of their chariots difficult to move, causing the men in the armies to say, "Let us flee from before Israel, for the LORD fights for them against the Egyptians" (Ex. 14:24-25). Sometimes the account of crossing the Red Sea depicts the Egyptians in control and only retreating because they see the waters closing in ahead, but this is not accurate. They panic because God puts them into a panic. It's only then, during the panic, does He instruct Moses to close the waters.

CLOSING THE WATERS

In the same manner that Moses parted the sea, so does he close it: "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." Being in a state of panic and disarray, the waters begin to close in on the Egyptians and they are thus dispatched into the sea to drown. Verse 29 reinforces what verse 22 initially reported: though the waters closed in on the Egyptians, it was like a wall on the right and left of the Israelites. This is the final blow to the Egyptians that God predicted in verses 16 through 18.

The Fate of Pharaoh

One question that often arises is: “What happened to Pharaoh?” The text never clearly answers. Some are of the opinion that he dies in the sea, and others are not convinced. What is clear is that Pharaoh went with his armies in pursuit of the Israelites. Verse 6 says, “he made ready his chariot and too his army with him.” Verse 10 says that “Pharaoh drew near” to the Israelites’ camp. What is unclear is whether or not he followed the Egyptians into the sea. Proponents of this theory suggest that Pharaoh and the Egyptians are used interchangeably. So when verse 23 says, “The Egyptians pursued and went in after them into the midst of the sea,” it’s argued that Pharaoh is included in this. However, Pharaoh is often separately named in addition to the Egyptians. Some other argue that, according to Psalm 136:15, God “overthrew Pharaoh and his host in the Red Sea.” However, this could mean that God overthrew him in general defeat, not necessarily by drowning him. It isn’t clear whether Pharaoh lived or drowned, but there are two reasons to think he survived. For one, the Bible typically gives clear detail when major characters in a story die. If Pharaoh did die in the sea, his death was extraordinarily ambiguous. Second, his survival makes more sense given God’s purpose for him. Having to return back to Egypt with no army, no chariots, no horsemen, and no captives would have been the ultimate blow to his power. Killing him is less effective in establishing dominance over him. Regardless, the text is unclear. Anything else is speculation.

What About Now?

One takeaway is the supernatural power of God to protect His people. Another takeaway is the (sometimes) somewhat terrifying nature of God. The pillar of cloud with fire that lights up the night sky is ominous at best. When the Bible speaks of the “fear of the LORD,” it is definitely warranted.

Study Questions

Day One

1. Read Exodus 14:19-20. Who was moving inside of the pillar of cloud? Where did the pillar of cloud move? What was the effect of it on the night sky? What did this prevent from happening?

2. Read Exodus 14:21-22. What did Moses do? What was the result of this? What did the people of Israel do after the waters of the sea were separated? What physical element did God use to separate the waters?

Day Two

1. Read Exodus 14:23. What did the Egyptian armies do?

2. Read Exodus 14:24-25. When did the LORD look down on the Egyptians? What did He cause? How did the Egyptian army respond? What were they saying?

Day Three

1. Read Exodus 14:26. What did the LORD command Moses to do? For what purpose?
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2. Read Exodus 14:27-29. What did Moses do and what resulted? What happened to the Egyptians who were in the midst of the sea? Did any of them survive? How did this contrast with Israel's experience?
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Day Four

1. Read Exodus 14:30. From who or what did the LORD save Israel? What did they see as a result of His works?
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2. Read Exodus 14:31. What did Israel see on this day? What did they believe as a result of this?
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Discuss the Text!

Week 34 Discussion: Protected

One thing we discover in Exodus 14:19-31 is that God is a God who protects His people in supernatural ways. First God creates an ominous barrier of cloud and fire that lights up the night sky and prevents the Egyptian armies from attacking. Then He parts an entire sea and creates a dry pathway through which His people escape certain defeat. He inflicts panic upon the Egyptian armies and then drowns them. The LORD protects His people in superhuman, supernatural, and sometimes terrifying ways. Talk as a group about the ways in which God still protects us today.

1. Icebreaker: Does God still protect His people today?
2. Has God ever protected you in a way that you cannot explain?
3. Has God ever led you to a place that seemed like a dead end, but wasn't?
4. Read 2 Corinthians 1:8-11. Why does God sometimes seemingly *not* protect us?
5. How is resurrection our ultimate protection?
6. How does God make you feel safe?

Takeaways:

1. The LORD creates a barrier between the Israelites and the Egyptians by the pillar of cloud.
2. The LORD separates the Red Sea and provides safe, supernatural passage for the Israelites.
3. The LORD causes panic in the Egyptian armies and then drowns the Egyptian host in the Red Sea.