

RUF Bible Study – The Book of Exodus
Doug Serven, RUF Campus Minister¹
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Exodus 13-15 – The Miraculous Out

There is a radio commercial on that has the theme of “What were they thinking?” A man interviews a football player who had scored a touchdown. “It was awesome when they were screaming when I scored,” he says. “They were saying, ‘Go Jack! Go Jack!’” He is asked if they might have been saying something else. “Yeah. ‘Go back! Go back!’ I was going the wrong way and scored for the other team.”

Ah. What was he thinking?

I have one of those. When I was in college I learned a song. And then, instead of teaching people hymns like we sing now, hymns of the faith, hymns of great passion, conviction and theology – I taught them the ones I knew. I didn’t know any better. So we sang, “*Oh Oh*” – *You are the God of all creation / You are the Lord who reigns on high / You are the God of my salvation / You are the one we magnify / Oh, Oh, Oh, Oh, Oh Praise his name!*” For the chorus you were supposed to spin around. What was I thinking?

Incredible. But the one that takes the cake has to be Pharaoh, Pharaoh. It’s to the tune of Louie, Louie and goes like this:

Pharaoh, Pharaoh, Oh baby Let my people go!

*Well, the burning bush told me just the other day
That I should come over here and say
Got to get my people out of Pharaoh's hand
And lead them on over to the promised land.*

*Well, all of God's people came to the Red Sea
With Pharaoh's army coming after me
I raised my rod, stuck it in the sand
And all of God's people walked across dry land.*

*Well all of Pharaoh's army was coming too
So what do you think that I did do?
I raised my rod and cleared my throat
And all of Pharaoh's army did the dead man's float.*

What was I thinking? If you love this song, I’m sorry. What happens when we sing things like this is that we start to think that we know the story of Pharaoh. We’ve “got it.” But that is so far from the truth. Making light of this story by singing of Pharaoh’s army doing the dead man’s float totally misses the pathos, the drama, the emotion of what is happening here. And – and this is huge – the rest of the Bible seems to think that this very story is essential to understanding who God is.

I don’t want to teach you that song (have I already done that by mentioning it?). I want to teach you the song of the Bible, of the God who saves sinners.

The questions before us are these? What is going on when we’re in trouble? Where do you go for help in times of need? What is salvation really like? So we turn to our passages. Commentator Alex Motyer writes: “As an illustration of the sheer oddity of life under divine leadership, Exodus 13-17 can hardly be beaten.”²

The Story

First let’s look at what happens, and there is a lot here to talk about. We start with our basic understanding that what we have here *is a story*. It’s not a textbook definition. You can’t look up “salvation” in the Bible and find an entry. You can’t google it for articles. You get the story of redemption. And this one sends out shockwaves into the rest of the Scriptures. Eugene Peterson is big on this: “Our salvation text doesn’t provide us with a dictionary definition of salvation; what we get is a

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For this series, I used commentaries on Exodus from Cole, Ryken, Childs, Pink, Cassuto, Motyer and Currid, as well *A House for My Name* by Leithart, *From Paradise to the Promised Land* by Alexander, and *The Gospel According to Moses* by A Dickson. I listened to sermons from Tim Keller and Les Newsom.
The reader should assume that none of the ideas expressed are original to me.

² Motyer, 178

salvation story, frequently remembered and often told.”³ Moses would have written this years after the fact in order to remind the people of what they or their predecessors had gone through. It was important enough to write down and tell again and again around the campfire, in their houses, to their new neighbors. Indeed, “Salvation is the story of a people, a community with a past, with ancestors, with common experience.”⁴

This all really begins in Exodus 12, but the ten plagues are a long introduction to this event, and they show that God is breaking down Egypt’s gods, reducing them to nothing before his children. Finally, with the tenth and worst plague, and the saving of the Hebrew’s sons by the Passover, Pharaoh’s son dies and he says Be gone!

This is it – Israel will finally leave slavery. The Egyptians are so ready to be done with this that they actually give the Hebrew people gold and jewelry for their trip.

In Ex. 13:19, we read that Moses remembered to take Joseph’s bones with him when they left. That may seem a little strange – this mummified body had been sitting there waiting for 430 years now – but it connects us back to Genesis 50 and reminds us that Exodus is really a continuation from Genesis and God’s promises there.

So God’s people are led out by a pillar of fire by night and pillar of cloud by day. But we find out in chapter 13 that Israel takes an indirect route which leads them to the shore of the Red Sea [really, the Sea of Reeds]⁵, to a dead end. This is some pretty bad escape route strategy. The map readers must have been pulling their hair out. No, not toward the sea! This is not good.

Pharaoh changes his mind, just as God has said and also because God does this, and takes off after them. He is thinking that his slave labor is escaping with his own permission, and that just cannot happen no matter what he’s lost thus far. We’re told that he outfits his horses and chariots. This is meant for us to think just how truly awesome Egypt was in military power. Pharaoh doesn’t go down easy. He’s excited when he sees where Israel has camped, and he’s ready to crush them.

The approach of Egypt is dominated by Pharaoh. He is on center stage. He is invincible, unassailable. And there is puny little Israel. It’s really a pathetic army. No training. No real weapons. What are they going to do?

Here’s the thing – Israel is doomed, trapped, and braced for massacre. They might not die, but they will surely be captured and taken back to slavery, to the life they’d just thought they’d escaped from. You should be worried about this. There is no way out. It’s a trap.

Then we read this in 14:13: *13 But Moses told the people, “Don’t be afraid. Just stand still and watch the Lord rescue you today. The Egyptians you see today will never be seen again. 14 The Lord himself will fight for you. Just stay calm.”*

Moses is their prophet, priest and king. But we see a disturbing event occur and we wonder if this might become a pattern. The people aren’t so sure: That’s your advice? Don’t be afraid. But we’re scared to death. Stand still and watch. Stay calm. Wow. Good one. Anyone else have something here?⁶

The people complain. They aren’t too happy with this plan. They cry out and complain. They doubted. And why not? The evidence and the circumstances were rather daunting, dangerous and desperate. In fact, we read that they really became delusional – Moses, we loved Egypt!! We were having a fun time there. Didn’t we say, Leave us alone? Weren’t there any graves in Egypt? (Egypt is known for its graves/pyramids.) It would have been better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die here in the desert. We want to go back and serve Pharaoh.

What were they thinking? They were looking around and taking stock and making statements based on what they saw. Except for one thing. What were they missing in their equation?

Hadn’t they just seen God do ten, count them, ten, plagues?! Wasn’t that rather unmistakable evidence to them that someone, something was a factor here and it wasn’t them? Weren’t they looking at these pillars of fire and cloud and noticing that they were being led by them? At the very least they should have cried out for an eleventh plague. God! We need your help!! You’ve got to come through! You’re the only chance we have.

Instead, they panic and plead to go back to Egypt. And what happens?

Moses tells them to sit down and shut up. He tells them to wait. To do nothing.

³ Christ Plays, 170

⁴ Christ Plays, 171

⁵ “Toward the Yam Suph”, as your NIV margin tells us, means “Toward the Sea of Reeds.” The words do not mean Red Sea, but Sea of Reeds or Sea of Rushes. “Red Sea” as a translation comes from the LXX, the translation of the Hebrew Bible into Greek some 200 years before Christ. Yam Suph does sometimes in the OT refer to the body of water we now call the Red Sea, at least the gulfs of Aqaba and Suez that continue the Red Sea proper north on both sides of the Sinai peninsula. In antiquity the Yam Suph also referred to the Bitter Lakes region of the delta along the line of the present Suez Canal. Proof of that comes from several sources, most notably the geographical detail of the Book of Exodus itself. If you consult your maps of the exodus in the back of your NIV or your ESV you will see that either likely route of the exodus takes Israel into the Sinai north of the northernmost tip of the Gulf of Suez.” From Rev. Rob Rayburn’s sermon at www.faihtacoma.org

⁶ Spurgeon: “I dare say you will think it is a very easy thing to stand still, but it is one of the postures which a Christian soldier learns not without years of teaching. I find that marching and quick marching are much easier to God’s warriors than standing still. It is, perhaps, the first thing we learn in the drill of human armies, but it is one of the most difficult to learn under the Captain of our salvation. The apostle seems to hint at this difficulty when he says, ‘Stand fast, and having done all, still stand.’ To stand at ease in the midst of tribulation, shows a veteran spirit, long experience, and much grace.” Spurgeon, “Direction in Dilemma” (No. 541), Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit (Pasadena, TX: Pilgrim, 1973), 9:654, found in Ryken’s commentary, p. 388.

And the pillar of cloud came and insulated them from the harm for the night, reminiscent of the darkness plague. Ra the sun god couldn't bring light to his people, but the Hebrews were in light.

Then, at the darkest moment just before the dawn, a mighty wind from the east came and Moses put his staff over the sea, and it parted and they walked out on dry land. Not just some of them, but all of them.

The Egyptians figure out what is going on and followed them across, but the sea closed. I think of the part in the Two Towers when the river looks like horses and the Nazgul are crushed under the weight of the water. The Lord swept them into the sea. The text says that "he flicked off" the Egyptians.

And God's people, these nobody slaves, are free without pursuers any longer. Free at last. From slavery to worship by a redeemer.

They sing a song of joy, a song of deliverance, a spontaneous song bursts out from their lips, the men and the women, all of them together rejoicing at how good and majestic their God is, the horse and rider to the sea. There is none like him, majestic on holiness, awesome in glory, working wonders.

The Lessons⁷

There are obvious lessons for us to learn in this story, and we need to let this story shape our thoughts and understandings. Over and over again, this salvation story is told, referenced and sung about in the Bible. Remember that this is the story that God wants his people to remember every year with their Passover meal. This story.

Here are some examples:

Ps. 78:13 *For he divided the sea and led them through,, making the water stand up like walls! 14 In the daytime he led them by a cloud, and all night by a pillar of fire.*

Ps. 106:9 *He commanded the Red Sea to dry up. He led Israel across the sea as if it were a desert. 10 So he rescued them from their enemies and redeemed them from their foes. 11 Then the water returned and covered their enemies; not one of them survived. 12 Then his people believed his promises. Then they sang his praise.*

Is. 50:2 *Why was no one there when I came? Why didn't anyone answer when I called? Is it because I have no power to rescue? No, that is not the reason! For I can speak to the sea and make it dry up! I can turn rivers into deserts covered with dying fish.*

Is. 51:10 *Are you not the same today, the one who dried up the sea, making a path of escape through the depths so that your people could cross over?*

Is. 63:12 *Where is the one whose power was displayed when Moses lifted up his hand — the one who divided the sea before them, making himself famous forever?*

This is a huge story. An important story. What can we learn?

God leads us to impossible situations. That's where his people were when their backs were to the sea and their fronts were to the Egyptian army. That sort of thing happens to us. We find ourselves in a hopeless place. In a desperate situation. And we ask why?

We might first think it's because of Satan. He's real and he's powerful and he seeks our destruction. But not in Exodus, not in our story here. Maybe not Satan, but our sin – because of what we've done we're now out of God's will and in big trouble. It's my fault. Again, not in this passage.

They are there because God led them there. Why would he do that? We looked at that in Exodus 1 and 2, and see it again here, although in our own lives, when we're so close to the action, we cannot see the purposes. God is determined to bring his people into the promised land. And he wants to show them that he alone can save them. How else can he teach them that lesson unless he puts them in a place where there is no way out. Even when it doesn't look like it, God is bringing about all things for the good of his people.

God knows which ways are best. He led them to the place that seemed the darkest, but it was the best for them. It's not the obvious way. Not the shortest way. Not the most direct way. But the best way. That is true for us. God may take us the long way, to teach us to rely on him and his timing.

We next learn that slavery is bad. Really bad. No kidding. That doesn't seem like much of a surprise really, does it. But in this passage we're witness to the transfer of allegiance. You see, this is in the inbetween place. They have left the slavery of Egypt. They aren't yet "slaves" to Yahweh and all his ways and laws. Some would consider that slavery. Certainly people these days would say that it is crazy to follow the 10 Commandments, to worship at the tabernacle with all those rules. What we need is freedom. Freedom!

The Bible agrees with Bob Dylan on this point. (Really, I suppose Dylan agrees with the Bible). He has an oft-quoted song, the preacher's dream song, that says, "You've gotta serve somebody. It may be the devil or it may be the Lord, but you're gonna have to serve somebody."

⁷ Much of these thoughts come from Rev. Tim Keller on his sermon on this text found at redeemer.com

He's right. You can serve bad things, or good things, but whatever you serve is your master. It's pretty easy to see that serving bad things is bad. Think of what happened to the lords who took the rings from Sauron for power. They were consumed by their master, turned into slaves.

But what about serving good things? How can that be bad? Because even good things have a price – your life. In *Overachievers*, Alexandra Robbins tells about “helicopter parents” who hover over their children to make sure they do everything right. They can't let go. They can't let them fail. And their children very often end up hating them for it.

Anything you serve, whether it be looks, or grades, or your kids, or love, or freedom – anything, will exact its price on your life. It will squeeze the life out of you. You will have to have it. It will rule you.

God's people need to serve him. They are deluded, slaves to their own passions. They don't see the world correctly. That's one of the worst things that can happen to slaves, when they identify with their captors. This is called the Stockholm Syndrome. The victim thinks “My enslaver is really nice. He likes me. He cares for me. He has my best interest in mind. He loves and cares for me.” There are cases where the kidnapped person goes on to commit crimes *for* the people who abducted her. [Patty Hearst]

Your master doesn't love you. He is using you and will soon kill you for another victim. Grades don't love you. Sex doesn't love you. Satan doesn't love you.

Wake up! Here's another chance to wake up and trust in God, the one who loves his children.

Do you see the world correctly? Are you a slave to your passions? Are you a slave to freedom? We are only free when we serve and worship God. Everything else will kill us in the end.

How can God's people be free? *There is a decisive transfer*. That's our next lesson. Sitting on the banks of this body of water with no where to go, the people need something to happen. And it does. Something big happens. This transfer moment thing is judgment for some, and salvation for others. The Egyptians went through the judgment and died. The Hebrews went through the judgment and lived.

Some of you may be thinking, “Well sure, but they had to walk through.” Yes, that's true. Faith is involved. But some of them surely had strong faith and others of them weak faith, but they all walked through and made it. It wasn't the nature of their faith that saved them. It was the object of their faith.

This decisive transfer is something that happens *to you*. What do you do to get your salvation? Nothing. The strategy is to be still. This and what follows are negative imperatives. Sit down and shut up. Stand your ground and wait.

This is important because we see here that no good people went through the waters. The Egyptians weren't good, and we know that. They were genocide killers. But we see touches here and will see more later, that the Hebrews aren't good either. They complain. They are ungrateful. As a matter of fact, they haven't obeyed the law because there is no law given yet. They don't get saved because they've obeyed the law or loved their neighbor or even loved their God. They're saved because God is their God.

God works through mediators, signs and symbols.

This is a small but important point. First, notice that God uses mediators. He is working through Moses. He's been doing that since chapter three when Moses met Yahweh at the burning bush. We see it here when God seems to rebuke Moses in verse 15. The people were bad, complaining and behaving irrationally. Moses was good, telling them right and true things as their leader. So why does Moses get the rebuke and the people don't? Because he takes the punishment for the people. In this, he points toward Christ.

In addition, we watch as Moses stretches out his staff. Why did he need to do that? He didn't per se (God can do things without staffs), but God told him to and he did. The people saw their representative and trusted him. We should as we see our leaders use the “tools” of the trade, the means of grace. God uses his leader, his signs and symbols to communicate to us.

The next lesson is also obvious: *God is the God of salvation, and he does it*. Salvation is not by works, so that no one can boast. All the important verbs in the story are his. What we have here is a sort of *ordo salutis* – the order of salvation. *He* does the work, the salvation work. God saves. Eugene Peterson writes, “The word, whether as noun or verb, is reserved almost exclusively for what God does: God is the subject, people are the object. God does it, we get in on it. Apparently, the Hebrews were the only people among their names who had this exclusive sense that salvation was God's work and only God's work. There is only one occurrence of the word (except in proper names) outside the Hebrew language and that is in the ninth-century B.C. Mesha inscription from Moab.”⁸ “Salvation is not limited by conditions, by impossibilities, by conventions. The Wonder at the Sea establishes it as fundamental that salvation consists in what God does: it is not a human project. We see and fear and believe and that's it.”⁹

God had led them into an impossible situation with their backs to the sea and the chariots of Egypt ahead of them. How did God save his people? Wind. Tides. Poor strategy. Unexpected failure of military technology. A sudden storm. In all these things we see the power of God as he uses creation in the service of redemption.

⁸ Christ Plays, 172

⁹ Christ Plays, 172

“God doesn’t just remove us from the trouble, but he brings into the human situation something that wasn’t there already. Yahweh enters in and he is present with us in the conditions. In our troubles. In our difficulties, sicknesses, addictions, devastations, difficulties, through assault and opposition. Salvation is God’s work in history and not a repudiation of history.”¹⁰

Friends, this is a miracle!! What is your reaction to this miracle of salvation? What does your heart do when you see the salvation of God’s people, their release from slavery by such a miracle?

The Song

There is a reaction there for you in the text. *15:11 Then Moses and the people of Israel sang this song to the Lord: “I will sing to the Lord, for he has triumphed gloriously; he has hurled both horse and rider into the sea. 2 The Lord is my strength and my song; he has given me victory. This is my God, and I will praise him — my father’s God, and I will exalt him! 3 The Lord is a warrior; Yahweh is his name! 4 Pharaoh’s chariots and army he has hurled into the sea. The finest of Pharaoh’s officers are drowned in the Red Sea. 5 The deep waters gushed over them; they sank to the bottom like a stone.*

The God of salvation is immediately worshipped in song. Not analysis, but song. The people don’t sit down and say, “Well, let’s think about this and make sure we get it all right.” They don’t go off by themselves for some personal reflection time to worship God in their own ways. They don’t journal. They don’t go for a run.

They sing. Story and ritual are taken up in song. No one did anything to bring about this salvation. So they have to sing about God alone.

Why do we sing? Group singing is sort of a strange thing, and there aren’t many places where you do it. Most of them would be a big concert where everyone has gathered and knows the words of their favorite bands. But that is a performance. Still, though it can be a profound experience.

Eugene Peterson has a few thoughts about this. He says that singing changes the meaning somehow. Song doesn’t explain, but it expresses. “Song is more than words, but there are no words to convey what that ‘more’ is precisely. Song is one of the two ways (silence is the other) of giving witness to the transcendent. And so biblically formed people do a lot of singing as they worship.”¹¹

Just like we learn through the story, we also learn about things in the song. We tell each other of God’s eternity – Yahweh is I am who I am. We sing of God’s power in his omnipotence. We remind each other of God’s wrath. Miroslav Volf, a theologian, professor and writer, in his newest book *Free of Charge*, said that he struggled for years with the idea of God’s wrath. He couldn’t see how God could ever be wrathful... it just didn’t make sense to him. Then his native Croatia underwent relentless attack and bombing — as he witnessed firsthand the destruction of the nations, he changed his mind. He didn’t just accept the wrath of God, but demanded it. “If God was not wrathful at this, then what kind of God would he be,” he asked. He soon made the connection that God is just in being wrathful toward the sin and injustice in Volf’s own heart. We must have a God who cares for justice. We simply must. We sing of this.

And God’s supremacy over all other gods in 15:11. God’s holiness, for he is pure. God’s unfailing love in 15:13.

That is the content of the song, but not the emotion behind it. Sure, there are lessons in there, but the act of singing it is more than that, as Peterson says. The worship of God cannot be reduced to the rational. “Any approach to salvation that does not eventually become worship, and the sooner the better, distorts and reduces salvation to a concept or a program or a technique that we can master and therefore control. But, of course, if we can do it or at least manage it, it is no longer salvation.”¹²

Do you see this? Does this move you in any way? How do we respond to something that has happened to us that we couldn’t do for ourselves? What do you do when you see your sin, slavery and wickedness? When you understand that even the good things you do have gone wrong and captured you as a slave to death, and you understand the depravity of your heart, what do you do? When and if you see salvation and its ramifications, the God works of prayer, obedience, justice, compassion, morality and the sovereignty of God, what do you do?

This song in Exodus 15 is the redeemed people’s national anthem. Can you sing it?

Do you see the connection on this side of the most important event in history, on this side of the cross of Jesus Christ?

God led his son to an impossible situation. It surely seemed to Satan that Jesus was trapped. The Bible is all about making this connection. In Matthew 2:15, Matthew writes that Jesus came out of Egypt. In Hebrew 3:3, the connection between Moses and Jesus is made. Jesus is the better Moses. The prophet, priest and king Moses was pointing to. In Luke 9, Moses, Elijah and Jesus are talking about the exodus, that’s the word in the Greek. But they’re talking about Jesus’ exodus, his departure from this world, his death, his final, decisive moment of salvation work for his people.

This passage isn’t really about what to do in times of trouble, although you could make that application. This passage is about coming to God in salvation. Jesus passed through the walls of death and came out on the other side. Romans 8:1-2 says that “*There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.*”

¹⁰ Christ Plays, 173

¹¹ Christ Plays, 176

¹² Christ Plays, 177

That's just it? How do you escape this slavery? Are you standing on the shores of the red sea? Or have you passed through? Have you been released from your Stockholm Syndrome, your identification with your captors, your desire to defend them and stick up for them?

Do you ever see your need of him, your condemnation before the law and wrath of God, and ** then ** you see the gospel of God's salvation by the new Moses, the greater Moses, who stood as a mediator, prophet, priest and king, the one who takes the judgment due to you, and you are just **a m a z e d!!!!???**

That should happen, you know. Because some day, as they are doing now in heaven, we will be singing this and other songs: Rev. 15: 3 *And they were singing the song of Moses, the servant of God, and the song of the Lamb: "Great and marvelous are your works, O Lord God, the Almighty. Just and true are your ways, O King of the nations. 4 Who will not fear you, Lord, and glorify your name? For you alone are holy. All nations will come and worship before you, for your righteous deeds have been revealed."*

There's another song I learned in college, one that stumped me for a long time. It was called Horse and Rider and came directly from Exodus 15:

*I will sing unto the Lord for He has triumphed gloriously,
The Horse and rider fell into the sea. I will sing unto the Lord for
He has triumphed gloriously, The horse and rider fell into the Sea.*

CHORUS

*Lord is God and I will praise him;
The Lord is God and I will exalt him.*

*I will sing unto the Lord for He has triumphed gloriously,
The Grave is empty won't you come and see. I will sing unto the Lord for
He has triumphed gloriously, The grave is empty won't you come and see.*

It's better than Pharaoh, Pharaoh. But I couldn't figure out why we were singing about dead Egyptians. It felt wrong to be glad about their death.

But I didn't get it. Obviously. The horse and rider are the powers of this world, the forces of evil and death in history and in my own life. They are coming for me. I have my back against the wall, so to speak. I am in trouble. I cannot escape. There is no way out.

But God. But God is there, and he is a God who saves his people. He triumphs. It's evidenced by the grave, by the triumph of Jesus over death itself in his resurrection. It is the anthem of his people, and we need to rise and sing it to each other far more than we do.

Here's another one, older than Horse and Rider, but not as ancient as Exodus 15:
Come, ye faithful, raise the strain, by John of Damascus, 8th century A.D.

*Come, ye faithful, raise the strain of triumphant gladness;
God hath brought forth Israel into joy from sadness;
Loosed from Pharaoh's bitter yoke Jacob's sons and daughters,
Led them with unmoistened foot through the Red Sea waters.
'Tis the spring of souls today; Christ has burst His prison,
And from three days' sleep in death as a sun hath risen;
All the winter of our sins, long and dark, is flying
From His light, to Whom we give laud and praise undying.
Now the queen of seasons, bright with the day of splendor,
With the royal feast of feasts, comes its joy to render;
Comes to glad Jerusalem, who with true affection
Welcomes in unwearied strains Jesus' resurrection.
Neither might the gates of death, nor the tomb's dark portal,
Nor the watchers, nor the seal hold Thee as a mortal;
But today amidst the twelve Thou didst stand, bestowing
That Thy peace which evermore passeth human knowing.
"Alleluia!" now we cry to our King immortal,
Who, triumphant, burst the bars of the tomb's dark portal;
"Alleluia!" with the Son, God the Father praising,
"Alleluia!" yet again to the Spirit raising.*