

THROUGH THE DEEP

Wild (Part 5) | Exodus 14

Have you ever had to walk through THE DEEP? Maybe you found yourself or are finding yourself now in deep trouble or on the verge of it. Perhaps you made what felt like an innocent choice but now all kinds of unintended consequences are rushing after you. Or maybe you made a mistake or a series of them and it's all crashing in on you now. Or you're in a situation where you did nothing so wrong but some enemy or illness is out to get you, nonetheless. Whichever way you turn or try to go, you've got problems. You are you in deep STUFF. You feel stuck or sunk and just plain scared because it seems there's NO WAY out.

What do you tell yourself in those moments? How do you counsel your family members or your friends or your workmates when they are there? And does the Word of God offer you any kind of help in such situations? Yes, it does, and the answer to all these questions can be found in the amazing book of Exodus that we've been studying together and return to again this morning.

When we left Exodus 13 last week, the fortunes of the children of Israel seemed to have turned for the good. God had finally broken the stubborn will and ruthless control of Pharaoh, the king of Egypt. Through a cataclysmic sacrifice, God compelled Pharaoh to release the children of Israel from the bitter slavery they'd endured for 400 years – the same length of time African people endured the Atlantic slave trade – a major reason why this story resonates so deeply with the Black Church to this day.

We ended Exodus 13 last week with the Israelites marching their way East out of Egypt toward the sunrise of a promising new era. We know where their ultimate destination is because God made that clear to Moses, as we studied in Episode 2. They are heading to what will come to be called the Promised Land – a land **flowing with milk and honey** (Exo 3:8), the place we today call Israel. So, here is where the story again becomes sort of WILD and you need to stay with me here because if you don't get the geography, you won't get the message. The slum where the majority of the Israelites have been housed over all these years is a place called Goshen in the delta of the Nile River. You can see its location in the upper LEFT of this map. The place where God is going to eventually take them is located in the upper RIGHT corner of the map. You see that word "Jerusalem" up there?

But get this: Here's how Exodus 13 concludes: **So God led the people around by the desert road toward the Red Sea** (Exo 13:18). It's like your Mom or Dad says: "Kids we're going on a family road trip. We're going from Chicago to New York and you're going to see the Statue of Liberty and the Empire State Building and eat great food and catch a Broadway play. And all the kids say, "Yay!!!" And you bundle everybody up in the car and you drive them to New Orleans. Take a look at that white

line on the map. That's the route God takes the children of Israel on to get to the Promised Land in the northeast. But wait, the story gets WILDER. When the Israelites round the tip of the Suez Peninsula and head north, they find themselves at about Day 15 at a place called Etham. It is literally a dead-end street, a box canyon. There is a mountainous wilderness to the NORTH. There is a mountainous wilderness to the WEST. That's what that darker brown terrain is. There is only water to the EAST. And to the SOUTH, there's about to be their worst nightmare.

So guess what God says: "Turn south." Chapter 14 opens up with these words: **Then the Lord said to Moses: Tell the Israelites to turn back and encamp near Pi Hahiroth, between Migdol and the sea. They are to encamp by the sea, directly opposite Baal Zephon.** You tell me, is there a kid on the planet who wouldn't be saying by now: "Dad, do you think maybe YOU should let Mom drive or stop and ask for directions or *something?!"*

But here is where we start to find out that God is operating on a higher plane. He's not dragged the Israelites down south to visit the Lint Museum or the World's Largest Ball of Twine. God has actually planned this whole diversion to teach TWO LESSONS and the first one is to Pharaoh. As my friend, Eric Camfield, might say: God has cast his fly-line way down south, way downstream on purpose, just waiting for that Big Fish to drift on down and take the hook. God says in the next verse: **Pharaoh will think, "The Israelites are wandering around the land in confusion, hemmed in by the desert." And I will harden Pharaoh's heart, and he will pursue them.**

When I first read that verse many years ago, I was confused by it. What does it mean when you and I read here or in some other parts of the Bible that God "hardens" somebody's heart? Does God want some people to fail? Does God make people fail? Through his life and teaching, Jesus shows us a God is mainly out to soften people's hearts, who goes seven times beyond what is required to reach people. Even in the Old Testament, God says through his prophets that his objective is to replace people's heart of stone and give them a heart of flesh, responsive to him, beating like his heart (Ezek 36:26).

Some scholars have suggested that statements about God hardening someone's heart is simply the Bible's way of asserting that God is sovereign over everything that happens. I believe he is, but I think we need to be very clear about GOD's heart. I'm gratefully for Pastor Gregory Boyd's observation about these statements in his book, IS GOD TO BLAME? Boyd points out that the root of the Hebrew word that gets translated "to harden" means "to strengthen," to lift up what's already there. Boyd writes: "*God hardens people by strengthening the resolve they have formed in their own heart. For example, six times Scripture says 'the Lord hardened Pharaoh's heart.'* But it also notes that Pharaoh hardened his own heart seven times before the Lord took his action... In every instance where Scripture speaks of God hardening someone, it's an act of judgment in response to decisions these people had already made. God simply ensures

that these rebels will do what their own evil hearts desire and not alter course for ulterior motives. But it's altogether unwarranted to suppose that God unilaterally hardens people's hearts against himself in the first place—all the while pretending to offer them the hope of salvation! When God decides to harden someone's heart, we can be assured that God wishes it didn't have to be that way.”¹

Exodus 14 goes on to say that: **When the king of Egypt was told that the people had fled, Pharaoh and his officials changed their minds about them and said, “What have we done? We have let the Israelites go and have lost their services!”** It's an example of reverse repentance. Instead of letting God's previous reproofs move them to become less selfish and less hard-hearted toward others, the Egyptians become more so! If you read the Song of Moses and Miriam in chapter 15, you'll get an even more revealing glimpse of the voracious hardness of Egypt's heart. Life is about destroying those who will not serve US.

So [Pharaoh] had his chariot made ready and took his army with him. He took six hundred of the best chariots, along with all the other chariots of Egypt. The Lord hardened the heart of Pharaoh king of Egypt, so that he pursued the Israelites... and overtook them as they camped by the sea.

Time is short, so permit me to summarize what happens next. I said a moment ago that God leads the Israelites on this circuitous journey to teach TWO LESSONS. The first lesson is aimed at Pharaoh and the Egyptians. I think this is because they are emblematic of the ORIGINAL SIN that afflicts humanity in every generation. It is the idea that I can and I deserve to occupy the throne... to be the center... to make the rules... to issue edicts... to be honored and glorified... in short, to take the place of GOD.

The great irony about that is that GOD is by all rights the center and the master but by his nature, is a servant. As Jesus shows us, he surrenders his privileges and his divine prerogatives, to LIFT up others. God is generous not grasping, self-giving not selfish. And, in the end, his Way will prevail. Why? Because he is actually GOD. He is not an ideal, a fantasy, a personal belief. He is the author and governor of the universe. Those who misuse his gifts... who abuse his people... who ignore the principles and practices by which he wants to see his creation function and flourish... will fail and finish badly. To them God says: NO WAY.

As I've already said, God doesn't want that hard outcome. As we've seen through the Exodus story, God gives multiple opportunities for people to soften their hearts and choose a different path. But, as chapter 14 vividly describes, Pharaoh did not. He went back to his self-advancing, other-defeating ways. Therefore, he and his regime were washed away. Don't get washed away. Don't be like the Pharaoh that so many voices today are encouraging you to be. Be much more like Jesus. That's the FIRST LESSON of Exodus 14.

But there is a SECOND LESSON and this one is aimed not at Pharaoh (and all he represents) but at GOD'S PEOPLE. I began my message today by asking: Have you ever walked THROUGH the DEEP? Have you ever faced circumstances so dire that you thought: "There is NO WAY forward, NO WAY out of this mess? Let me ask now an even more important question: Have you considered the possibility that God might purposely LEAD you to such a place -- in the hope that you would give up on your own energy and ingenuity and instead put all your trust in HIM as your ONLY WAY? Could you imagine something that WILD?

The climax of Exodus 14 is a moment like this. From a human standpoint, the Israelites are truly trapped. The way to the north and west is blocked by mountainous wilderness. The way to the south is blocked by the thundering chariots of Egypt's army growing ever closer. The way to the east is nothing but a surging sea.

Parenthetically, it is helpful to know that in the Bible, the "sea" represents CHAOS. It is seen as a symbol of the unpredictable, uncontrollable, roiling reality of life out of which can come our complete destruction (as happens to the Egyptians in Exodus) or a creative beginning (as happened in Genesis or when the Gospels describe Jesus opening the eyes of his disciples by calming the stormy sea or yet again in the Book of Revelation when the New Creation is pictured as an era when there is no longer any sea (Rev 21:1). The common biblical idea is that God is Lord over the CHAOS – over the things that frighten and freeze us and might also form and free us. What is the "sea" in your life right now – the deep waters, the chaotic circumstances? Would you open yourself to the possibility that God has brought you to this place for your good?

It's always hard to take this point of view. Exodus 14 says that: **As Pharaoh approached, the Israelites looked up, and there were the Egyptians, marching after them. They were terrified and cried out to the Lord... They said to Moses, "Was it because there were no graves in Egypt that you brought us to the desert to die? It would have been better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die in the desert!"** I'm tempted to condemn the children of Israel for how whiny and weak they are on this road trip. But it is hard for any of us to see or trust in the purposes of God when there seems NO WAY.

Until there is. Exodus 14:21 reads: **Then Moses stretched out his hand over the sea, and all that night the Lord drove the sea back with a strong east wind and turned it into dry land. The waters were divided, and the Israelites went through the sea on dry ground, with a wall of water on their right and on their left.**

The Egyptians pursued them, and all Pharaoh's horses and chariots and horsemen followed them into the sea. Then the Lord said to Moses, "Stretch out your hand over the sea so that the waters may flow back over the Egyptians..." Moses stretched out his hand... and at daybreak the sea went

back to its place... Not one of [the Egyptians] survived. That day the Lord saved Israel from the hands of the Egyptians... And when the Israelites saw the mighty hand of the Lord displayed... the people feared the Lord and put their trust in him and in Moses his servant.

It is easy to get this story wrong and miss the huge lesson we are meant to take from it. The female Episcopalian priest, Fleming Rutledge, points out that in the animated movie, *Prince of Egypt*, there is a song that typifies the mistake made by many. The song comes right after the scene where Moses stretches out his hand over the Red Sea and the waters part. The lyric says: "*Miracles can happen if you believe.*" How many times have you heard that idea? You just need to do more. You just need to have greater faith. Salvation is in your hands.

But as Fleming Rutledge remarks, the message of the Exodus story is that the miracle will happen whether YOU believe or not. "Israel was not saved because of [it's] faith. [On the contrary], Israel failed to believe right up until the moment of deliverance." Their last words before the waters split were: **It would have been better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die in the desert!** "Moses isn't making the miracle happen, either; he is only an instrument. "The power is the Lord's. GOD is doing this, not because Israel has earned it, but because he IS a God of deliverance. **'God makes a way out of no way.'**"² Take that in, will you?

This WILD idea didn't just imprint itself upon the children of Israel. It became the lens through which the Christian Church came to view all the challenges and obstacles of life. They realized that the life of Jesus was bracketed by two impossibilities even greater than the walls of water through which Israel passed through the Red Sea. On one side was a virgin's womb and on the other a vaulted tomb. But as Presbyterian pastor, Peter Larson, observed: God was not blocked. "[Christ] entered our world through a door marked, 'No Entry' and left through a door marked 'No Exit.'" HOW? Say it with me: Because God can make a WAY out of what looks like NO WAY.

A popular praise song puts it like this: *You turn mourning to dancing / You give beauty for ashes / You turn shame into glory / You turn graves into garden / You turn bones into armies / You turn seas into highways / You're the only one who can.* So let me close with this question: Who can make a way out of the "NO WAY" that you or some loved one may be facing right now? God can. So do what YOU can but put your trust, your hope, your blessed assurance in HIM.

¹ <https://reknew.org/2019/03/god-hardens-hearts-what-does-that-mean/>

² Fleming Rutledge, *And God Spoke to Abraham: Preaching from the Old Testament*.