

# Hop, Skip and a Jump Through the Bible: Exit and Entrance

Exodus 14:10 – 15:21

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GR FUMC

Pastor Al Winn of Atlanta, GA, tells a story about the time little Johnny's Sunday School class studied the story of the crossing of the Red Sea.

"Tell us what you learned today, Johnny," his parents said on the way home from church.

"Nothing much," said Johnny.

"Wasn't it exciting about the Israelites crossing the Red Sea? How did they get across?"

Johnny thought a bit and then began to warm up to the subject. "Well, the Egyptians had the Israelites trapped against the sea. So Moses called in the engineers and threw a pontoon bridge across, and in the night and the fog he moved all his troops across to the other side. In the morning the Egyptians saw what had happened and rolled across the bridge in their tanks. But just before they got to the other side, Moses called in an air strike and sank the bridge with all the Egyptians on it."

"Johnny," said his mother. "You know your Sunday School teacher didn't tell the story that way!"

"Well, not exactly," said Johnny. "But if I told it the way she told it, you wouldn't believe it."

It is quite a story, isn't it? Made for a movie! In fact, a couple generations of us have no choice but to picture the exodus as Cecil B. DeMille portrayed it in *The Ten Commandments*, his 1950s epic movie. In making it, DeMille allowed himself a little Hollywood license, but basically he chose to take the biblical story literally: God's voice

(a bass, of course) speaks to Moses out of the burning bush, the ten plagues decimate Egypt, the sea becomes two towering walls of water with a canyon of dry land between, the Ten Commandments are engraved by a flaming finger on two tablets of stone, and so forth. Like many attempts to reduce the biblical narrative to its literal meaning, the movie makes the story hard to believe (Borg 93).

Scholars have long debated the question of the historical accuracy of the book of Exodus. Most now agree that what the escaped slaves crossed was not what we know as the Red Sea, but a smaller body of water called the Reed Sea. The Bible reports that 600,000 men crossed over, along with women and children – meaning 2 or 3 million people, total. The number was probably closer to a few thousand people. Nevertheless, as scholar Marcus Borg says, “the exodus is rooted in the historical experience of ancient Israel. The memory of having been Pharaoh’s slaves in Egypt is indelibly printed on the pages of the Hebrew Bible and etched in the life of ancient Israel.” (Borg, 93)

Whatever historical events lie behind the stories of the plagues and the crossing of the sea, the text does much more than simply report ‘what happened.’ Like all sacred scripture, its purpose is deeper than that. For all who want to take the Bible seriously, whether or not they take it literally, the question is: Why did Israel tell the story that way? What is it meant to teach us? (Borg 94)

When we left Genesis, the first book of the Bible, Joseph, son of Jacob and great-grandson of Abraham, was securely ensconced as Pharaoh’s right-hand man. But when the next book of the Bible, the book of Exodus, opens, 400 years later, the scene has changed dramatically. “Now a new king arose over Egypt,” the text says, “who did not

know Joseph.” With the passing of time, Egypt’s new leaders have forgotten Joseph and his service to their nation. Now the Hebrews, who have become a sizable population, are feared as a potential enemy rather than trusted as the descendants of a beloved leader.”

(Kalas)

The Egyptian government oppresses and enslaves the Hebrews, setting them to hard labor. But even in slavery, they continue to multiply. Eventually, the king decrees that every boy born to the Hebrews should be thrown into the Nile. Imperial oppression combines with genocide. This is the world into which Moses is born

Martin Niemöller, the German pastor who heroically opposed Adolf Hitler, was a young man when, as part of a delegation of leaders of the Evangelical Lutheran Church, he met with Hitler in 1933. Niemöller stood at the back of the room and looked and listened. He didn't say anything. When he went home, his wife asked him what he had learned that day. Niemöller replied, "I discovered that Herr Hitler is a terribly frightened man." (Brueggemann)

Pharaoh, like Hitler after him, is afraid -- afraid that there isn't enough to go around, so he needs to control as much of it as he can, in order to stay in power as long as he can.

Moses' mother defies the king's decree and hides her baby boy until she can hide him no longer. Rescued by the Pharaoh's daughter from his basket floating on the river, he grows up in the imperial household. As an adult, however, he becomes a fugitive, flees from the empire of his birth, marries a foreign woman, and becomes a shepherd. It isn't until many years later that God calls him back to Egypt as God's response to the Hebrews' cries for release.

Moses announces God's command to the imperial power that rules their world: "Let my people go." It's an order, not a plea. Pharaoh's response is haughty and contemptuous and the ten plagues are the result.

Eventually, hard-hearted Pharaoh relents and lets the Hebrews leave Egypt. But almost immediately he changes his mind. His army pursues the fleeing slaves and catches up to them at the sea. With the water in front of them and the army of the empire behind them, the Israelites do what frightened people everywhere have always done: they blame someone else.

"Was it because there were no graves in Egypt that you have taken us away to die in the wilderness? What have you done to us, bringing us out of Egypt? Is this not the very thing we told you in Egypt, 'Let us alone and let us serve the Egyptians'? For it would have been better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die in the wilderness."

Pharaoh's army was not the only thing that had caught up with them; apparently fear got there, too. It's a moment that any leader of change will recognize, even change much less dramatic than the escape of slaves. "You can't do that! It will never work! Who do you think you are, trying to tell us what to do? We liked things better the way they were before."

British pastor Steve Chalke says that on his refrigerator he has "a cartoon illustration of Moses parting the Red Sea. Behind Moses stands a small group of Israelites looking out from the shore at the water miraculously rising up in two giant walls either side of puddle pathway stretching into the distance. The only speech bubble

comes from the mouth of one of the reluctant looking Israelites who is complaining to Moses ‘You never said it would be muddy!’” (Chalke, 26)

According to the story in Exodus, the Hebrews aren’t complaining about the mud. From their perspective, their only choice is whether to die by military assault or by drowning. Moses’ response to his frightened, reluctant followers is a classic example of courageous leadership. In their fear, they want to make *him* the issue. “Why have *you* brought us here? What have *you* done?” But he knows that the real issue is not about him, it’s about learning to trust in God’s leading and in God’s power to sustain them. (Robinson) Do not be afraid, stand firm, and see the deliverance that the LORD will accomplish for you today.”

Then occurs the event that has been remembered and celebrated in Jewish and Christian liturgies ever since: God causes the waters to fall back, the Israelites cross, Pharaoh’s army and chariots become mired in the mud, the sea returns and they drown. God has rescued Israel from Pharaoh’s army. (Borg 96?)

From the army, but not from their own fear. They’ve exited from Egypt, but they’re not yet ready to enter the Promised Land of Canaan. [*grapes*] In the book of Numbers, the fourth book of the Bible, the band of wandering Hebrews gets close enough to their destination to send out a committee of 12 to look over the land. These spies bring back pomegranates and figs, and “a single cluster of grapes” of such abundance that “they carried it on a pole between two of them” (Num 13:23). (The logo of modern Israel’s tourist bureau depicts two men carrying a bunch of grapes on a pole between them, a sign of the abundant natural resources of their land. Kalas 27-28)

But only two of the 12 spies think they should move ahead into the land of Canaan. The 10 in the majority are afraid, afraid of the inhabitants who already live there, afraid of leaving the desert they know, afraid that there isn't enough to go around so they have to protect what little they have. Of course the people vote with the majority report – not simply because it's a majority, but because it is always easier to go with inaction than with challenge.”

So they continue to wander. Numbers describes it as God's judgment, but they didn't need divine judgment to postpone their entry into the promised land for forty years; their fears were enough to close the door to the future.

So many people these days feel caught between Pharaoh's army and the Red Sea, and they see no exit. They have bills to pay and children to feed, but they've lost their job. Finding a job means being willing to move, but they own a house that can't be sold. Under this kind of stress, staying healthy is crucial, but they've lost their insurance and can't go to the doctor. Young adults can't find jobs and so are back home with their parents after being on their own. Marriages are strained, family relations are tense.

Brothers and sisters, we live in a time and place in which fear has the power to keep us from moving forward. The fear of failure, the fear of loss, the fear that what lies ahead might be worse than what came before, the fear that there's only so much to go around so we need to protect what little we have – all of these and more have the power to send us back to Egypt. Back to worrying about me first, everyone else second. Back to playing it safe instead of trying something new. Back to doing what's cheap, instead of what's right.

The Pharaohs of the world want us to believe that life consists of buying and selling, weighing and measuring, collecting and keeping. God helps those who help themselves, right? But Jesus presents us with a new way, one infused with the mystery of abundance, love and generosity. Don't be anxious," he says, "everything you need will be given to you." "Do not let your hearts be troubled and neither let them be afraid. I am with you always." The blind receive sight, the lame receive strength, five thousand are fed and 12 baskets of food are left over. Jesus transforms the little that we think we have by blessing it and breaking it and sharing it. From broken Friday bread comes overflowing Sunday abundance.

Jesus, like Moses before him, came to set God's people free. Only it is not Pharaoh to whom we are in bondage. It is bondage to our own fear that cripples us – fear that we don't have enough, fear of what lies ahead, fear that this is all there is and there's no way out. So God planned another exodus for us -- in Jerusalem this time -- where the Red Sea of fear is split with a cross and Jesus leads his people through.

Friends, the Bible tells us that that we were created by the magnificent, inexplicable love of God. This same Bible says that our lives will end in God, and that this gift cannot be taken from us. In the words of St. Paul, neither life nor death nor angels nor principalities nor things -- nothing can separate us from God. We know about our beginning and we know about our ending. Therefore we can live without fear. We can live courageously and generously precisely because we know that, even when we see no way, God will make a new way.

Let us pray:

Lead on, O cloud of Presence, the exodus is come,  
In wilderness and desert our tribe shall make its home.

Our slavery left behind us, new hopes within us grow.  
We seek the land of promise where milk and honey flow.

Lead on, O God of freedom, and guide us on our way,  
And help us trust the promise through struggle and delay.  
We pray we may, together, all journey to that land  
Where justice dwells with mercy, and love is law's demand.

“Lead On, O Cloud of Presence”  
#2234 *The Faith We Sing*

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