

## Exodus 14

### Trust and tremble

#### Learn to trust what God has promised, said and done

We recently came across one of the books that our kids had when they were tiny. There was this book which obviously was advertising itself as having a story for every day of the year, as its title included the phrase “365 stories”.

But *if only* David had wanted to do a different story each day! Instead, he somehow latched onto this story about **The Old Car**. Even the word “story” is a bit generous, because nothing actually happened. It was just half a page, including at least a pastel colour picture of a rusty old car left to moulder in a forest somewhere. I suppose you could say it was “descriptive”, but that’s about all. No action, just basically a statement that there was this car there making the forest untidy, and a kind of half wish that it hadn’t been dumped there.

But David loved that story. He asked for it over and over, day after day ... though goodness knows why. And he got to know it so well that when I just had to liven it up by seeing whether I could miss some of the tedious words out, *No*, I was corrected ... and given something of a **Paddington hard stare**. Oh, if only I could have progressed to reading those Paddington stories instead!

But some stories *are* meant to be re-told, just like some films are made to be watched over and over. Think Christmas, and out they all pop again on the box:

**Miracle on 34th Street**

**The Wizard of Oz**

**Mr Bean’s Christmas turkey**

Oh, and don’t forget the **Nativity Story** itself, which we still re-tell every year. There are some stories like that don’t just tell us a series of events that happened, but start to tell us who we think ourselves to be. Those things that are foundational to our family, perhaps. I remember that original TV series **Roots** - good title for this! - where each successive generation is taught their family background - their *roots* - all the way back to the original young man captured in Africa and transported to what is now the USA. The boy who was forced to call himself, at the end of the first TV episode, by the white man’s name, Toby ... but who remembered his true name, Kunta Kinte.

Stories like that tell us who we are. And the story that we read earlier - though I’d insist we’re not just talking “story” here, but *history* - would be told down through the generations of the Jewish nation ... because it told them who they are. And *whose* they are.

The basic facts are quite dramatic, and easy enough to remember: **the Hebrews are finally fully freed from Egyptian captivity as God intervenes to defeat Pharaoh’s army.**

But there are also lessons for them to learn from what happens here, that perhaps we also need to learn. After all, it is the same saving God who is now our heavenly Father.

Trust even when you’re confused  
Think through your grumbling  
Understand God’s hand in history  
Believe what you see God has done

- **Trust even when you're confused**

We left things last week with the Hebrew people exiting Egypt. Finally, the confrontation between Pharaoh and God had reached its awful, fatal conclusion:

***At midnight the LORD struck down all the firstborn in the land of Egypt, from the firstborn of Pharaoh who sat on his throne to the firstborn of the captive who was in the dungeon, and all the firstborn of the livestock.***

(Exodus 12:29)

***The Egyptians were urgent with the people to send them out of the land in haste. For they said, "We shall all be dead."***

(Exodus 12:33)

Near the end of chapter 13 we get a description of their first few steps away from captivity.

***When Pharaoh let the people go, God ... led the people around by the way of the wilderness toward the Red Sea.***

(Exodus 13:17-18)

And although it then says ...

***And the people of Israel went up out of the land of Egypt equipped for battle.***

(Exodus 13:18)

Well, they might have been *physically* equipped, I don't think they were anything like *mentally* equipped for battle. And although it seems to start off reasonably enough ...

***And they moved on from Succoth and encamped at Etham, on the edge of the wilderness.***

(Exodus 13:20)

But then things seem to start to go a bit awry.

***Then the LORD said to Moses, "Tell the people of Israel to turn back and encamp in front of Pi-hahiroth, between Migdol and the sea, in front of Baal-zephon; you shall encamp facing it, by the sea."***

(Exodus 14:1-2)

It would be nice to have a map to show you the route ... but unfortunately most of these places can't now be identified with any certainty. But you can see the problem with that word **back**. Why on earth would they turn *back*? What's the point in that? Perhaps people would even start to ask, *Does God really know what he's doing, letting us wander around apparently aimlessly like this?*

And that is precisely it. It is *designedly* apparently aimless. God is intending that the Hebrews should *look* as if they're lost. And then, maybe even worse, it seems that they end up in a terrible boggy place that is impassible. It's a dead end! Yes, that is precisely God's intention!

***“For Pharaoh will say of the people of Israel, ‘They are wandering in the land; the wilderness has shut them in.’”***

(Exodus 14:3)

That will prompt one final cataclysmic conflict between God and Pharaoh. Israel ripe for re-picking will be too much of a temptation to resist!

***“And I will harden Pharaoh’s heart, and he will pursue them, and I will get glory over Pharaoh and all his host, and the Egyptians shall know that I am the LORD.”***

(Exodus 14:4)

Folks, I have no doubt that the people of Israel were mightily confused by all of this. I don’t think that we’re told that Moses relayed this thinking to the people. They might have just worked out that they weren’t making a whole lot of progress ... and wondering ... and very possibly worrying. Very possibly worrying very seriously.

And then things get worse again. It’s no longer a *concern* about being something like lost, but God’s prediction comes true. Pharaoh *does* pursue them. Though first of all it doesn’t seem to focus on their being lost, and therefore still accessible. Instead, there is a realisation of the economic impact of this large free labour force disappearing over the horizon.

***When the king of Egypt was told that the people had fled, the mind of Pharaoh and his servants was changed toward the people, and they said, “What is this we have done, that we have let Israel go from serving us?”***

(Exodus 14:5)

Although here you might say, *Hold on, it was just a few days earlier that Pharaoh’s firstborn son has died in the middle of the night, and Pharaoh orders the Hebrews out! So how come he is now informed that they have fled?*

I think what might explain that is that originally Moses had demanded what appears to be a *temporary* exit for the people.

***Then they said, “The God of the Hebrews has met with us. Please let us go a three days’ journey into the wilderness that we may sacrifice to the LORD our God, ...”***

(Exodus 5:3)

And now it is reported that they are not coming back. They have indeed absconded! And just as with CoronaVirus, balancing human cost and economic cost, Pharaoh’s loss of his own son ... Egypt’s loss of thousands of firstborns ... is balanced against the loss of all that slave labour. And economics win.

***So he made ready his chariot and took his army with him, and took six hundred chosen chariots and all the other chariots of Egypt with officers over all of them.***

(Exodus 14:6-7)

***The Egyptians pursued them, all Pharaoh’s horses and chariots and his horsemen and his army, and overtook them encamped at the sea, by Pi-hahiroth, in front of Baal-zephon.***

(Exodus 14:9)

So now the Hebrews' concerns are very definite. There is an army on the horizon.

***When Pharaoh drew near, the people of Israel lifted up their eyes, and behold, the Egyptians were marching after them, and they feared greatly.***

(Exodus 14:10)

If they had found it difficult to trust God when things were just a bit odd - does anyone know where we're headed? - now is seriously the crunch point. Are they going to trust God when things are now looking not just odd, but decidedly dangerous?

Folks, when you encounter curiosities in life ... when things are not turning out the way you had envisaged or hoped ... are you going to *decide* to trust God? What do you need to have got straight in your thinking *now* so that that will be possible *then*?

And if it's worse than that, if the wheels are not just wobbling but actually falling off, are you going to *decide* to trust God? What do you need to have got straight in your thinking *now* so that that will be possible *then*? What do you need to feed your souls on *now* so that, come the cold months or the lean years, you won't spiritually starve?

At least these people know where to turn, to some extent:

***And the people of Israel cried out to the LORD.***

(Exodus 14:10)

Though there is still a bit of a problem here. They might turn to God, in some sense. But they also turn *on* Moses.

- **Think through your grumbling**

Now this is interesting. Do you think it's really quite a sign of how little you really depend upon God, if you take out your stress on the people in your life? Perhaps particularly on anyone whose decisions or leadership have affected you. I'm not saying that you will never meet rogues in your workplace or your neighbourhood or even your church, who do all sorts of irresponsible things, and who might deserve and even *need* some straight talking to. But let's be fair to Moses - he had only been following God's directions.

It really is a case of **don't shoot the messenger**. That's a useful rule to apply in churches, too, if at times you're not awfully happy about something the Bible says.

But it might be worth, while we're here, not just looking at the angry words that were said here, but thinking through the attitudes that might have lain behind them.

***They said to Moses, "Is it because there are no graves in Egypt that you have taken us away to die in the wilderness? What have you done to us in bringing us out of Egypt?"***

(Exodus 14:11-12)

What strikes me first here is the attitude of despair. This is definitely ***We're doomed!*** In this verse and the following one, they talk about dying in the wilderness. They are like

those proverbial **rabbits in the headlights**. They are mentally paralysed. They cannot even start thinking rationally about the situation that they are in.

Which means that they are **forgetful**. It's not that long since God has intervened in a dramatic, terrible, deadly, miraculous way, with the Egyptian firstborn sons dying on that night when the Hebrew firstborn sons were graciously spared, covered by the blood, as we might say. Before that had been nine other wonders from heaven.

And because they are forgetful, they have no mental leverage to **reason**. If they forget God's ten clear interventions in their recent history, they have no reason to think there will be something miraculous now. If by contrast they had remembered them, then *reason* might have prompted them at least to consider that God might still be able to do something in this situation.

So because of all of this, natural alarm - seeing the Egyptian army in pursuit - becomes blind terror. Folks, there are plenty of things that we will encounter that are alarming. We're certainly in the middle of an alarming year, with the NHS still near breaking point treating the ill and vaccinating the population at large.

But remember the process of remembering. Think about how thinking things through can bring calm and hope again. Right in the middle of the book we call "the lamentations of Jeremiah" there is one moment when the clouds part and the stars are visible again. There is plenty of darkness around, *but ...*

***But this I call to mind, and therefore I have hope: The steadfast love of the LORD never ceases; his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness.***

(Lamentations 3:21-23)

***"The LORD is my portion," says my soul, "therefore I will hope in him." The LORD is good to those who wait for him, to the soul who seeks him. It is good that one should wait quietly for the salvation of the LORD.***

(Lamentations 3:24-26)

But back in Exodus again, just look now at second of these two verses where Moses is getting it in the neck. What else do you see there?

***"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."***

(Exodus 14:11-12)

Yes, a repeat of "die in the wilderness". But do you see something of the **fear of the unknown**? That's one thing that we will need to tackle for ourselves over the rest of this year, as, hopefully, life returns to something like normal in the UK - and we can actually meet in person again. I'm sure that there will be the temptation to just go back to exactly what we knew and did before - but will that be because it is *better*, or because we don't have the gumption to do something different which could turn out to be better?

Folks, this church is slowly approaching a bigger crisis, for us, than Coronavirus. Over the next few years we - or, it is fair for me to say this, *you* - are going to be forced to take some daring decisions about the future of the church. If God does not send a

substantial group of new people here - and perhaps it's time we started praying seriously for that - then just the "same old same old" will mean that the numbers will dwindle and the doors will close. If you wait until you can afford to employ a new pastor, it will quite possibly be too late. It might be time to start thinking radically. Are you going to trust God that something different in the future could still be OK?

But, coming back to that verse again, there's something else which I think we should note, too.

***"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."***

(Exodus 14:11-12)

It's the thinking that what the world offers us for sure is better than what the Gospel offers us by faith. It's the thinking that life in captivity was not *that* bad after all. And, to be honest, that's a bit of a stretch. It wasn't that far back in Exodus that we read about the Hebrews despairing of their situation in slavery.

***During those many days the king of Egypt died, and the people of Israel groaned because of their slavery and cried out for help. Their cry for rescue from slavery came up to God.***

(Exodus 2:23)

And over the succeeding chapters, the conditions of slavery get even worse. Yet when it comes to the crunch, being a slave can seem preferable to being saved. That is really odd, when you say it like that. But it's realistic.

Just on the human level, they say that people can become institutionalised. If someone has been in **jail** for so long, it can be that they're no longer able to come to terms with life outside again when they are finally released.

But when we talk about salvation, there is more to it than that. The Gospel is humbling, remember. Confessing our need. Admitting our sin. *Turning* from that sin. Depending only on Jesus Christ for acceptance with God. Committing your life to the lordship of Jesus Christ.

For some people, they prefer to continue as a slave of sin, in the spiritual pig-sty to which they have become accustomed, and have persuaded themselves is not so bad after all ... rather than bowing the knee, even to the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ. Rather than

***Humble yourselves, therefore, under the mighty hand of God so that at the proper time he may exalt you, ...***

(1 Peter 5:6)

... the disturbance that accompanies liberation is just too much to handle, as well as too much to hope for, perhaps ... and so they turn to **bite the hand that feeds them** - even though it's offering them the bread of life.

Folks, if *you* are ever tempted to grumble ... will you dare instead to think it through? Ask yourself what you are perhaps afraid of. Ask yourself what you are valuing so much ... too much? ... that this threat to it generates this quite possibly sinful response.

That could be an interesting exercise this evening, don't you think?

- **Understand God's hand in history**

Now there is something in this passage which possibly rankles when you read it, and perhaps it's time we spelled it out and tackled it today - though even now, we can only do it briefly. We've seen it in the preceding chapters, so we can't pretend it's simply a one-off here in chapter 14. Right from the start of this Egyptian slavery scene in Exodus, God has been promising to intervene in a particular way.

***And the LORD said to Moses, "When you go back to Egypt, see that you do before Pharaoh all the miracles that I have put in your power. But I will harden his heart, so that he will not let the people go.***

(Exodus 4:21)

Here in chapter 14, when the refugees seem to be wandering aimlessly:

***"And I will harden Pharaoh's heart, and he will pursue them, and I will get glory over Pharaoh and all his host, and the Egyptians shall know that I am the LORD."***

(Exodus 14:4)

Not just Pharaoh, either. After God's command to Moses to part the sea ...

***"And I will harden the hearts of the Egyptians so that they shall go in after them, and I will get glory over Pharaoh and all his host, his chariots, and his horsemen."***

(Exodus 14:17)

And the question that this normally generates, especially nowadays, is *Is this fair?* Doesn't that make Pharaoh and the Egyptian soldiers just **puppets**, with God pulling the strings? In which case, how can God hold Pharaoh responsible for his actions? Does he have any choice? Could he resist?

We could do the Big Theology answer to this, or we could just look around in the book of Exodus for clues. Actually, I think those clues will help us towards the Big Answer anyway. And I think they'll also help us to show that we haven't quite asked a fair set of questions. But we should definitely get an answer to the "could he resist" question.

So if we scout back through these early chapters of Exodus, we don't just see that "I will harden Pharaoh's heart" line that I've already shown you. It is the first time the "harden" word is used, and I wonder if, because of that, it is the most fundamental way to look at it. And you might also have to admit that if God is *God*, if God is the creator, then he has the right to do what he wishes with what he has made, people included.

I know that that can sound a bit threatening and intrusive. But we simply need to hold on to other things that we know about God: he is good, he is just, he is holy. He will not

do anything - even he *cannot* do anything - which is evil. So if it says that God said he would harden Pharaoh's heart, even if it seems rather odd to us, it *cannot* be something improper.

But look at what else we can also see here.

***Still Pharaoh's heart was hardened, and he would not listen to them, as the LORD had said.***

(Exodus 7:13)

***But when Pharaoh saw that there was a respite, he hardened his heart and would not listen to them, as the LORD had said.***

(Exodus 8:15)

Two other descriptions. One that is neutral, merely descriptive: "was hardened". And one that puts the ownership the other way: *Pharaoh* hardens his own heart.

You could argue that there is an order. Chapter 4: *God* hardens his heart. Chapter 7: his heart is hardened. And finally chapter 8, and Pharaoh himself is doing it to himself. And I can see some sense to that directionality.

But most fundamentally, I think these three ways of looking at it are precisely that: three ways of looking at the same thing. They are all true. But they are just different angles on the same truth. They fit seamlessly together.

And therefore that "could Pharaoh resist?" question is revealed as a bit of a fraud. No, he's not compelled to do this by God exerting external pressure upon him. Pharaoh's personal integrity is not violated. He acts entirely freely, in that sense. He sees the Hebrew escapees wandering around, realises that Egypt has a chance to recapture them, and goes for it. He's not compelled to utter the words despite every sinew of his body straining against it. His pulse quickens. A feral smile spreads on his face. He turns around to the commanders of his forces as he reaches for his armour. And he snarls, *Let's go get them!*

And that should be a huge relief for us as we contemplate history and politics. Look at this big claim from the NT:

***And he made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling place, ...***

(Acts 17:26)

Think of your **map of the world**. Remember that at different times those lines and names have been totally different. And remember that *how* those lines got there has not always been achieved by the godliest of means. Often there have been wars, and territories have been captured. People have been transported. People have fled for their lives. There have been atrocities, and there have been astounding acts of heroism.

Go way back into Genesis, and you see Abraham promised a land ... but not yet.

***Then the LORD said to Abram, "Know for certain that your offspring will be sojourners in a land that is not theirs and will be servants there, and they will be afflicted for four hundred years.***

(Genesis 15:13)



***“But I will bring judgement on the nation that they serve, and afterward they shall come out with great possessions. ... And they shall come back here in the fourth generation, for the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet complete.”***

(Genesis 15:15-16)

God is behind all of that, justly, sovereignly. But the Amorites are not compelled to perform whatever that finally disqualifying “iniquity” might be; they just do it freely.

So right now, look across the Atlantic, at that sad and almost shameful transition of power between the 45th and the 46th presidents of the USA. Did God bring Trump to office, 4 years ago. Yes. And the voters voted him in. Did God bring Biden to office, 4 days ago? Yes. And the voters voted him in - despite allegations to the contrary. And both of those men may be and have been blessings *and* curses to the country, in different ways.

But we hold onto one big thing, in all the political meanderings of nations. God is still at work, with purposes of grace. Why this or that boundary or ruler?

***And he made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling place, that they should seek God, and perhaps feel their way toward him and find him.***

(Acts 17:26-27)

And so Israel is to be set free from Pharaoh, to be that promised blessing to the world. Pharaoh's hold has to be finally, devastatingly, unquestionably broken, for God to be seen to be gracious ...

***“I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonours you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.”***

(Genesis 12:3)

... and for God to be seen to be glorious.

***“And I will harden Pharaoh's heart, and he will pursue them, and I will get glory over Pharaoh and all his host, and the Egyptians shall know that I am the LORD.”***

(Exodus 14:4)

And we need to trust that God remains this gracious sovereign God, right up to the end. We might despair of politicians ... actually, that would be quite easy ... but we must never despair of the God who moves nations around this chessboard of planet earth. Remember what Jesus said, by way of warning and encouragement:

***“And you will hear of wars and rumours of wars. See that you are not alarmed, for this must take place, but the end is not yet.”***

(Matthew 24:6)

It is still all under control, with God's purposes of grace:

***“But the one who endures to the end will be saved. And this gospel of the kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come.”***

(Matthew 24:13-14)

I'm thinking that we will focus a bit more this evening on the details of the opening - and then closing - of the Red Sea (and whether that's what we think of nowadays, with modern maps, as the Red Sea). And that stuff about

***"Fear not, stand firm, and see the salvation of the LORD, which he will work for you today."***

(Exodus 14:13)

Don't think that you have the full works of these talks just by being here on Sunday mornings. Come on in on Sunday evenings, too, and ask those questions you're itching to ask, and think through the applications for yourselves in a bit more detail. Even without Arthur's sandwiches at present, it's worth coming back for.

And many a sermon has been preached on that verse on screen alone. But although there's all that very graphic stuff from the centre of the chapter - summed up in those very memorable images from that old film the **Ten Commandments**, with Charlton Heston in a beard, the very classic image of Moses - we'll leave that until this evening.

There's one more point I would like us to see here, from the last verse. All the action has finished, but I think this is really quite significant.

- **Believe what you see God has done**

Here's your potted summary of the events of the chapter.

***Thus the LORD saved Israel that day from the hand of the Egyptians, and Israel saw the Egyptians dead on the seashore.***

(Exodus 14:30)

Quite a sombre summary, really, with that reference to rafts of corpses washed up on the tideline. Notice that we're not told that Pharaoh died in all of this catastrophe. It's not often that the leaders instigating the campaigns end up as cannon fodder. It's the rank and file who typically end up paying the price for the politician's showy words.

But here is a positive note to finish on.

***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 14:31)

That story, with the temporary parting of the waves and all that, is the stuff of Hollywood blockbuster movies. That is dramatic, obvious power, evidenced all the more by the heaps of bodies that will start to stink as the sun climbs in the sky.

And the people stop grumbling. They start a very healthy fear of this mighty God who has chosen them as his people. They start to believe in the promises he made. They've seen with their own eyes that God *keeps* his word. They even grant that Moses was right to say and do what he said and did.

But let me take you to a different scene of triumph. A triumph the exact moment of which nobody witnessed, but which had even greater effect. You could even say exactly the opposite effect.

***And Jesus cried out again with a loud voice and yielded up his spirit. And behold, the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. And the earth shook, and the rocks were split.***

(Matthew 27:50-51)

The content of that “loud voice”? Quite possibly ...

***When Jesus had received the sour wine, he said, “It is finished,” and he bowed his head and gave up his spirit.***

(John 19:30)

And *that* triumph is marked not by death, but *life*.

***The tombs also were opened. And many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised, and coming out of the tombs after his resurrection they went into the holy city and appeared to many.***

(Matthew 27:52-53)

Folks, those Hebrews who had escaped Egypt see the bodies on the shore. And we look back to the Cross and see, by contrast, an explosion of life. They believed in God’s servant Moses ... who died a few years later We believe in God’s Son, Jesus ... who died and rose and lives and reigns forever

The Hebrews believed what they saw God had done through Moses.

We believe what we read God has done through Jesus Christ.

The people of God stand gazing down on the shoreline, or looking back to the Cross and then the empty tomb, finally knowing who they are. And *whose* they are. And at what price we have been bought.

**Learn to trust what God has promised, said and done**