

The Red Sea and Beyond

“Moses said unto the people, Fear ye not, stand still, and see the salvation of the LORD, which he will shew to you to day: for the Egyptians whom ye have seen to day, ye shall see them again no more for ever.”
—Exodus 14:13

AS WE BEGIN OUR LESSON, we see the Israelites on the western shore of the Red Sea, in great desperation, recognizing fully their extremity, for before them lay the Red Sea, and behind them were the pursuing Egyptians. (Exod. 14:5-12) Let it be remembered that it was God who brought them there, for it was at Etham, in the edge of the wilderness, that he turned

them southward to Pihahiroth, as if to increase the barriers before them.—Exod. 13:20; 14:1,2

Surely the shallow crossings to the north of the Red Sea would not have presented so impenetrable a barrier as they met at Pihahiroth. Had God permitted them to follow the easterly course from Etham, however, they might never have realized that their deliverance from Egypt was not the result of their labors, but wholly of God. How often

does God have to lead us into experiences wherein it becomes necessary for us, as with the Israelites at the Red Sea, to “stand still, and see the salvation of the Lord.” All such experiences are permitted of God for the express purpose of strengthening our faith.

So it was with Israel. God separated the waters of the sea, seemingly by natural means, for the account indicates that a strong easterly wind blew all that night, perhaps exposing for the time a sand bar over which they crossed to the farther shore. (Exod. 14:21) The Israelites, beholding the path through the sea, probably also recognized that the waters, temporarily separated, would again return. Remembering how God had dealt with them while in Egypt, and how he had delivered them from the hand of Pharaoh, they were now rightly exercised. They could, and would, demonstrate their faith and appreciation of past favors by believing that this self-same God would bring them to the opposite shore before permitting the waters to return.

Many believers today have no difficulty in accepting the account of the Israelites crossing the Red Sea. Yet, it is interesting to analyze the Scriptural account concerning this incident more carefully than is usually done, and to realize the simple way in which God brought about this marvelous victory for his people. In Exodus 14:21,22 we read, “And the LORD caused the sea to go back by a strong east wind all that night, and made the sea dry land, and the waters were divided. And the children of Israel went into the midst of the sea upon the dry ground: and the waters were a wall unto them on their right hand, and on their left.”

From this it is apparent that the water was evidently so shallow at times that a strong wind was enough to keep the ground exposed and dry, thus allowing the Israelites to walk safely across to the other side. Because the text says that the waters were “a wall” unto them on their right hand and on their left, many have been led to the assumption that two high perpendicular walls of water stood erect in a miraculous manner. We do not question God’s ability to have performed such a miracle if it had been needed, but it seems that such is not necessary to an understanding of this account.

The Hebrew word here translated “wall” is *chomah*, and means a “wall of protection,” not necessarily a perpendicular structure of some sort. The same word is used in I Samuel 25:15,16, where we read, “The men were very good unto us: ... they were a wall unto us both by night and day.” In like manner the waters on either side of the exposed ground served as a protection to the Israelites; for had it not been for this water the army and chariots of Pharaoh would have outflanked and surrounded them, thus cutting off their escape.

Being unable to surround the Israelites because of the water on their right and on their left, the only thing left for Pharaoh’s hosts to do was to drive straight through on the same path that the Israelites had taken. “And the Egyptians pursued, and went in after them to the midst of the sea, even all Pharaoh’s horses, his chariots, and his horsemen.” Then the Lord “took off their chariot wheels, that they drave them heavily: ... and the sea returned to his strength [perhaps high tide] when

the morning appeared; ... and covered the chariots, and the horsemen, and all the host of Pharaoh that came into the sea after them; there remained not so much as one of them.”—Exod. 14:23-28

This account is a clear picture of chariots, horsemen, and soldiers caught in soft sand from which they were unable to extricate themselves. The wheels sank down—“they drave them heavily.” In the morning the wind ceased, the tide returned, and the hosts of Pharaoh, immovably stuck in the sand bars, finally sank out of sight. Thus the account is seen to be a plain historic narrative of what took place, and what would be certain to take place under such circumstances.

LOOKING BACK UPON VICTORY

The Israelites were now safely across the Red Sea, and they were permitted to look back, to stand still and see the salvation of God. Having thus exercised faith, and being rewarded with the victory thereof, they did not look back longingly to Egypt. Rather, they rejoiced in their deliverance, looking back only to see the utter destruction of those who attempted to walk unworthily in the path of faith. This victory of faith gave to Israel the assurance that never again would they be troubled by these Egyptians, and so in the full glory of it all, they sang a song of deliverance. With what abandon must they have sung it, and with what exceeding joy. What an incentive for them to journey on, led and guided by the hand of God, to the Canaan of promise!

At least this once, they praised God. They seemed for the moment to have forgotten self. Note the exultation of their song: “I will sing unto the LORD,

for he hath triumphed gloriously. ... The LORD is my strength and song, and he is become my salvation: he is my God, and I will prepare him an habitation; my father's God, and I will exalt him." (Exod. 15:1,2) However, as we shall shortly see, the Israelites soon forgot this glorious God, and thought too much of themselves, resulting in murmurings rather than this hymn of praise. Hence there was a grieved God and a lost Canaan for that generation. —Heb. 3:10,17-19; I Cor. 10:5

There are times when, in the providences of God, we, too, like Israel of old, are brought into tight places; when, humanly speaking, there is no possible way of escape for us. While we may wish to be doing a great deal about it, there is absolutely nothing that we can do. Deliverance from these situations, if it comes at all, must be through God. We must look to him as our strong tower, as the God of our salvation. It is as "Pihahiroth, between Migdol and the sea."

If in obedience to his will we stand still, awaiting his orders to move forward, we shall soon observe, as it were, a seeming suspension of nature's laws, as the waters of the Red Sea parted for Israel at the proper time. When faith opens up thus a way before us, it is for us to walk in that way of faith to our journey's end. Therefore it is essential that we let go of ourselves and permit God to work in us and for us. (Phil. 2:13; Heb. 13:21) Placing ourselves thus completely in the Lord's hands, the victory of faith is soon ours. (I John 5:4) Then we, too, can sing the song of our deliverance.

At times, we may fail to think of God and his mighty works on our behalf, but rather we think of

self and our own interests. These, all too often, come first. Sometimes we may feel sorry for ourselves, and long for past pleasures, though these were and still are but shallow and empty habits of the past that we have renounced for the greater joys of the Spirit. Thus we, like Israel, murmur and repine. It is well for us to note that God, despite this tendency on the part of Israel to forget him, continued in long-suffering kindness to exercise himself on their behalf. Can it be supposed that he does not have the same concern for us, his spirit-begotten children?

As time drew on, at Kadeshbarnea God ceased to strive for Israel. (Deut. 1:19-42) We, too, must be on guard lest, by continued unbelief and unfaithfulness, we be denied the rest that now remains for the people of God. (Heb. 4:8-11) Let us then carefully consider the Apostle Paul's words in Hebrews 3:12, "Take heed, brethren, lest there be in any of you an evil heart of unbelief, in departing from the living God."

FORGETTING SELF—REMEMBERING GOD

There are but two ways open to us as Christians. One is forgetting self and remembering God; the other is forgetting God and remembering self. The former is the way of faith and will be rewarded by God. The latter is the course of unbelief and disobedience, and merits his sore displeasure. The song which the Israelites sang on the eastern shore of the Red Sea was a hymn of praise, but it was theirs to sing only because they had forgotten self and remembered God. Let us keep in mind that if we are, in time, to sing the song of final deliverance,

we must every day, and in every way, remember God and forget self, saying, “None of self, and all of thee.”—*Hymns of Dawn*, #224

The account tells us that Moses led the Israelites from the Red Sea into the wilderness of Shur, and into this wilderness they went “three days” journey. (Exod. 15:22) Earlier, when Moses pleaded before Pharaoh for the release of Israel, he explained that they wanted to go “three days’ journey into the wilderness, that we may sacrifice unto the LORD our God.” (Exod. 3:18; 5:2,3) It is this wilderness of Shur that likely is referred to in the entreaties of Moses to Pharaoh, since this is the first time subsequent to that where the three days’ journey is referenced. It was only after they had reached the farther shore of the Red Sea that they were truly out of the hands of the Egyptians, so we can be reasonably sure that this was the wilderness referred to by Moses before Pharaoh.

We ask, however: Did the Israelites sacrifice unto the Lord, as Moses explained to Pharaoh was their purpose to do? Let us see. Evidently their water supply had run out, and they were thirsty. Concerning this we read, “And they went three days in the wilderness, and found no water. And when they came to Marah, they could not drink of the waters of Marah, for they were bitter: ... And the people murmured against Moses, saying, What shall we drink?”—Exod. 15:22-24

What a picture of the frail human heart we have in this account! How soon it can forget God and his mighty works. Instead of dwelling on the mountaintops of faith in the glorious light of God’s countenance, it allows itself to be cast down by the world,

the flesh, or the devil into the dark and dismal valley of the shadow of death. Instead of offering to God the sacrifices of thanksgiving, it murmurs and repines. Where God should be enthroned in the heart, self is enthroned instead. How well, indeed, the psalmist has put it when he declares, "Oh that men would praise the LORD for his goodness, and for his wonderful works to the children of men! And let them sacrifice the sacrifices of thanksgiving, and declare his works with rejoicing."—Ps. 107:21,22

WE FORGET—GOD DOES NOT

Israel forgot God, and remembered self. Thus did their songs of praise and thanksgiving after crossing the Red Sea give way to the murmurings of the flesh. Nevertheless, God in his graciousness still dealt with them. Was it not he, who, in his providences, had led them to Marah? Could he not have saved them the bitterness of the waters, and the hardness of the way? Certainly yes, but these experiences, to the heart centered upon God, would be but stepping-stones bringing them closer to him.

God had not forgotten his people, but they had forgotten him. Now, with their journey only commenced, they murmured again. Indeed, they were very thirsty and there was no water. Suddenly, arriving at Marah, they see a stream and anticipate refreshment. Instead of praising God for his guidance to the water, they seem to be thinking merely of self, and the satisfaction of their desires.

If in faith and by faith, the Israelites had been mindful of the Canaan of God's promise, the hardships to the flesh would have seemed but light afflictions, which they might then the more easily

have borne. The waters they found at Marah were bitter, and lacking faith, they murmured, seemingly against Moses. However, it was really against God. God heard, and in his loving kindness and tender mercy, blessed them with refreshment. He showed Moses “a tree, which when he had cast into the waters, the waters were made sweet.”—Exod. 15:25

Often God has to bring us to some bitter waters—that is, hard, trying experiences. At such times we should remember God, and when we do, we shall find that even these difficulties have been sweetened for us by all the gracious provisions he has made through Jesus. His promises, which lay before us the purpose of these experiences, sweeten the bitter waters for us. As we sing, “Simply to the cross I cling,” the stream of life which often flows with bitter waters is sweetened by the contemplation that we are daily and hourly brought closer to our eternal inheritance—God’s Canaan rest.—Heb. 4:9,11

IMPORTANCE OF APPRECIATION

It is well to note that not a word is said on this occasion concerning Israel offering to the gracious God the sacrifices of thanksgiving. It seems that they simply drank the sweetened water, taking all of his grace for granted as a matter of fact. This is a lesson for all the people of God. We, too, like Israel of old, may fail to appreciate God’s kindnesses to us as we should. We may take these blessings as if it were his duty to bestow them upon us. We may be forgetful of God; or at least, we are not as thankful as we ought to be. Nor are we to assume that because God has graciously responded to all our murmurings, he will continue so to do if we presume too

much upon his grace. All our trials, and all our experiences, coming to us as the true spiritual Israel of God, are permitted by him for the purpose of fitting and preparing us for the "inheritance of the saints in light." (Col. 1:12) Therefore, let us ever offer God the acceptable sacrifice of praise, even in our wilderness wanderings.—Heb. 13:15

The next place to which God led the Israelites was Elim, "where were twelve wells of water, and threescore and ten palm trees: and they encamped there by the waters." (Exod. 15:27) Here we find no mention of murmuring, but we also find no praise and thanksgiving to God offered, despite the fact that all of their needs were being supplied.

Let us never get the idea that if everything should go well with us, and all of our needs were supplied, we would necessarily lead more acceptable lives before God. Experience teaches us quite to the contrary. Many years ago a noted professor told the story of a roommate during his college days who wished to improve his intellectual life by concentrated study at night. He procured a large, comfortable chair, slippers, and a lounging jacket. An adjustable rack was fastened to the side of the chair to keep books at the proper angle for the eyes. A special lamp was installed, together with eyeshade, pencils, paper, and even a revolving bookcase. The professor's roommate would come home in the evening, take off his coat, put on his jacket, take off his shoes, put on his slippers, sit comfortably in his chair, adjust his eyeshade, and then fall asleep!

With us also, we may at times need uncomfortable experiences to rouse us out of our lethargy. God gave Israel the hardness of the journey so they would

have a greater desire for the land of promise, the land flowing with milk and honey. This undoubtedly is the thought of Moses' words in Deuteronomy 32:10-12: "He found him [Israel] in a desert land, and in the waste howling wilderness; he led him about, he instructed him, he kept him as the apple of his eye. As an eagle stirreth up her nest, fluttereth over her young, spreadeth abroad her wings, taketh them, beareth them on her wings: So the LORD alone did lead him."

STIRRING UP THE NEST

Indeed, those little eaglets in that nest way up in the distant crag of yonder mountain, far above the point where any human being can reach them, feel so safely sheltered within the comfort of their nest. The comfort is so satisfying, and since the mother eagle brings them their food, why should they ever leave the comfort of that nest? The mother, though, instinctively knows that those eaglets will never learn to fly that way; so she stirs up the nest, to drive them out. Perhaps the mother eagle finds little sharp twigs or thorns of some kind and sticks them into the sides of the nest to make it uncomfortable for the little eaglets. We can imagine how those young eaglets would finally get up on the edge of the nest, still seeking comfort, when suddenly the mother would flutter her wings, and over the edge of the nest they would go as if falling into a bottomless pit. The eaglets make an effort to fly, and this is just what the mother wants. She then spreads her wings, probably gets underneath them to bear them safely back to rest. Only thus do they learn to fly. In this way God dealt with the children

of Israel in their wilderness wanderings, and likewise does he deal with us.

It is true, God does grant us many moments of peace, rest, and tranquility, even before we reach our Canaan beyond. Surely we do have our Elims. Nevertheless, let us not forget the purpose of these is not that we shall, at such times, complacently idle away our time. Rather, we are to refresh ourselves and build up that spiritual reserve which is to enable us the better to withstand the rigors of the desert wilderness over which we still must travel.

Let us, at such times, show our God how we really do appreciate his loving kindness and tender mercies by praising him with the song of our lives—the song of faith and obedience to his will. When the time comes for us to leave these blessed places of calm, and to strike out into the howling wilderness, let us be willing to leave Elim behind and enter into the hardships of the way, in full assurance of the fact that it is God who leads us. Let us forget self and remember God. Then shall we have the peace that surpasseth all human understanding, even in the midst of trials and difficulties, for “great peace have they that love thy law: and nothing shall offend them.”—Phil. 4:7; Ps. 119:165