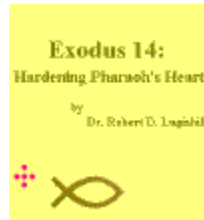


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Exodus 14: Hardening Pharaoh's Heart

Verses 11-18

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Verse 11:

And they said to Moses, "Is it because there are no graves in Egypt that you took us to die in the desert? What in the world have you done to us in taking us out of Egypt?"

And they said to Moses: This bitter remonstrance against God's chosen leader is called "a rebellion" by the writer of Ps.106:7,8.

no graves in Egypt: The use of word meaning "graves" here, is more than a little ironic. First, because Egypt, the land of the Pyramids, is renowned for its tombs. Secondly, this "rebellious generation" did in fact later die in the desert as discipline for their contrariness, and, according to scripture, had their bones "scattered in the wilderness" for their unbelief and lack of faith in God and His promises (Heb.3:17; 1Cor.10:5; Num.15:32,33).

in the desert: Here the people impugn Moses' judgment and motives at the time of their initial departure. As we have seen previously, they are not even actually yet in "the desert" proper, but are nevertheless quick to attribute to Moses' the intention of taking them there to die (see verse three above). In blaming Moses, they are really only demonstrating their own failure of faith in the Lord.

What in the world: Note that not only is the behavior of the Israelites at this point similar to the Egyptians (in ignoring God and the role He will play in this confrontation), but at this point they even use the same phraseology. The Hebrew *mah-z`oth*, "what in the world" is exactly what the Egyptians had asked themselves in verse five! But at least the Egyptians were blaming themselves for the problem. The Israelites

here blame Moses, God's appointed, and, by implication, God Himself for the predicament in which they now find themselves.

Verse 12:

Is this not the word which we spoke to you in Egypt: "Leave us alone that we may serve the Egyptians, for it is better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die in the desert".

Is this not the word which we spoke to you in Egypt: Before catching sight of the Egyptian army arrayed in battle against them, Israel's attitude had been one of pride and defiance (verse eight). The question therefore is highly disingenuous. But did the Israelites in fact ever express such a sentiment at the time of Moses' confrontation as they claim here? When Moses returned to Egypt by the Lord's command in order to lead the Israelites to freedom, the people initially supported him on seeing him perform certain "signs" that showed he had indeed been sent to them by God (Ex. 4:27-31). However, after Moses' first encounter with Pharaoh and Pharaoh's refusal to let the people go, the Israelites lost heart and "did not listen to Moses" (Ex. 6:9). It is possible that such a sentiment as is recorded here was expressed during one of these periods of despondency. Nevertheless, it is clear that this was not their overriding view, otherwise they would not have left their homes with intention of departing from Egypt altogether. Hence the question must be answered "No, not really!", for had they truly felt at the time that there was a fair chance that they would "die in the desert" if they followed Moses, it is clear from their conduct here that they would not have had the courage and faith to follow him in the first place.

Verse 13:

Then Moses said to the people, "Do not be afraid! Take your positions and watch the deliverance of the Lord which He will accomplish for you today. For the Egyptians whom you have seen today, you will not see ever again forever.

Then Moses said to the people: Moses does not even bother to reply to the charges of the people, nor does he react in anger. He merely gives them the orders necessary for them to share in and appreciate the deliverance of the Lord (in which he retains full confidence).

Do not be afraid! Fully realizing that the people have made these groundless charges against him purely out of fear, Moses cuts right to the quick of the matter and addresses the root of the problem: the Israelites need to control their fear by re-focusing their faith on the Lord, and Moses tells them so.

Take your positions: The translation of the Hebrew verb *yatsabh* by the phrase "take your positions" is well supported elsewhere in scripture. (1) The nation of Israel encamped and on the march of necessity functioned as an army (cf. Num.2), and we can

easily see in Moses' command here a "warning order" necessary for this large host to receive before any large scale and coordinated movement of the Israelites could occur. Note that Moses has apparently not been told *how* the Lord has planned to deliver Israel and defeat the Egyptians, but Moses is nevertheless completely confident that He will do so, and makes the necessary preparations so as to be ready when the deliverance arrives (whatever it may be, the Israelites will be ready to move).

We can certainly learn a lesson from this. We believers we call upon the Lord often to help us in our trials and tribulations, and to deliver us from our personal predicaments. But how often do we take the steps that *we* must necessarily take even *before* our prayers are answered? Stepping out in faith and acting *before* we have actually seen the deliverance of the Lord, we proclaim our belief in Him and in His faithfulness. By refusing to act until we first see a sign that He will answer our prayers, we only demonstrate how little we really trust Him.

Moses' command for the people to muster has another, practical side, of which everyone in a position of leadership should take note. By giving the people something positive to do, he helps them take their minds off the fearsome development they have been observing, and allows them to participate in his genuine, faith-based solution. It is perhaps largely as a result of this opportunity to get back on the right track that later do fall back into a more compliant mode and obey the commands which follow in this chapter. After all, the writer of Hebrews tell us that *they* crossed the Red Sea "by faith" (Heb.11:29).

watch the deliverance of the Lord which He will accomplish for you today. Ultimately the Israelites will, of course, be saved - not through the actions commanded by Moses, but because the Lord will deliver them Himself. Moses commands them to watch and understand that it is God who is protecting them.

For the Egyptians whom you have seen today, you will not see ever again forever. Literally, "you will not see them again anymore unto eternity." Moses deliberately puts this in the most emphatic possible way, demonstrating his absolute faith that, in spite of how hopeless things seem to be, God will "stand in the gap" and save them from annihilation.

When we really do "walk by faith, not sight" (2Cor.5:7), when faith really does give us "assurance of things we can't see" (Heb.11:1), then we too can, like Moses, face seemingly hopeless situations in total confidence that God will not let us down, but will instead come to our rescue, though we cannot see the precise means, nor know the exact time.

Verse 14:

The Lord will fight for you, but you must keep quiet".

The Lord will fight for you: Though Moses has put the Israelites into their "ranks", he

knows that deliverance they are counting on must nevertheless come from the Lord. As Neal points out, there was no other chance for survival:

[A]t this time Israel was not ready to fight. Fresh from slavery in Egypt, they were lacking in both weapons and will power. Therefore, God says, in this instance, that He will fight for them. (2)

but you must keep quiet: The disjunctive clause in Hebrew yields a strong adversative sense. The contrast between the Lord's action and the people's silence is a wonderful picture of the biblical concept of grace, where we merely trust, while God does the work.

Verse 15:

Then the Lord said to Moses, "What were you crying out to me just now? Tell the Israelites to move out!"

What were you crying out to me just now? The Lord addresses Moses directly (the verb is singular). As the leader, Moses is responsible for his charges (even though he has no part in their failure of faith). Recognizing him as such, the Lord deals only with him. Note that this underlines and supports Moses' authority.

One can compare the situation to a similar one in John 6:67-69. In that New Testament passage, as the faithless depart, our Lord asks the twelve whether or not they wish to go too. The purpose in asking the question is not sarcastic, but rather designed to demonstrate, by the offering of a bad alternative which faithless men have already accepted, the true faith of the twelve. This is shown by Peter's answer:

"Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life, and we have believed and have come to know that you are the Holy One of God .

Giving Moses a chance to identify with and accept the people's cry of unbelief serves to demonstrate Moses' true faith which stands in stark contrast to the faithlessness of the people. They have already grasped at a bad alternative to trusting God and have instead cried out in fear. The Lord's question to Moses is more an acknowledgment of his faith than a true question, just as it was to the twelve in Jn. 6:67. Moses remains silent and faithful, showing that he, at least, has passed this test of faith.

Tell the Israelites to move out! The Lord proceeds to issue the orders that will bring about the deliverance of His people, Israel. Because of Moses trusted God and exercised both faith and responsible leadership in preparing the people for action, they are now ready to follow this order and so take advantage of God's miracle.

Verse 16:

But as for you, lift up your staff and stretch out your hand over the sea and divide it so that the Israelites may go through the midst of the sea on the dry ground.

your staff: This is the "staff of God" which Moses has been using to perform God's signs and wonders all along (see Ex. 4:17-20). There is no miraculous power in the piece of wood itself, but the staff is a sign of the authority of the one to whom it belongs (compare Aaron's staff that budded: Num.17). By having him perform the miracles of Exodus with the staff, God makes it clear that such power does not reside in Moses, while at the same time establishing Moses as the one with the authority (vested in him by God) to mediate such miracles.

stretch out your hand over the sea and divide it: Moses probably lifted the staff high over his head with one hand (symbolizing thus the power of God) and stretched the other out over the sea (symbolizing the application of that power). This is unquestionably meant to be a supernatural act of unprecedented proportions (such as leading the Egyptian chariots through a swamp could never be). Most people would have a difficult time keeping a level head while mediating such awesome divine power, but scripture tells us that Moses was the most humble man on earth (Num.12:3).

so that the Israelites may go through the midst of the sea on the dry ground: The meaning is clearly that they should march through the place the sea had occupied with the waters divided on either side. No naturalistic interpretation of the event can be reconciled with what this text actually says. God meant it to be an undeniable miracle of the highest order.

Verse 17:

But as for me, behold, I am about to harden the heart of the Egyptians so that they may go in after them and that I may gain glory for myself through Pharaoh and his entire force; both through his chariots and his horsemen.

I am about to harden the heart of the Egyptians: As we have noted above, this hardening is necessary to render the Egyptian forces willing to do what they desire, namely, pursue Israel through the sea-bed. In the face of such a tremendous miracle, all of their former awe and paralyzing fear at the undeniable power of the Lord would doubtless have restrained them from such rash action. Only after God "hardens" them (i.e., allows them to overlook the terrible power of God; see above on verse four) do they willingly go in after the Israelites, ignoring the miracle of the pillar of the cloud and fire, turning a blind eye to the miraculously parted sea (either of which would no doubt have been sufficient to dim their ardor without the hardening process). Later, they will realize their folly when another divine miracle occurs and they suddenly comprehend that the Lord is fighting for Israel (verses 24-25).

both through his chariots and his horsemen: i.e., his entire force (see on verse seven above). No one will escape.

Verse 18:

Then the Egyptians will know that I am the Lord, because of my glorification through Pharaoh, his chariots and his horsemen.

Then the Egyptians will know that I am the Lord: This prediction is fulfilled when the pursuing Egyptians do recognize God as *Jahweh* ("the Lord") and then flee in terror (verse 25).

because of my glorification through Pharaoh, his chariots and his horsemen: There comes a time when everyone recognizes the glory of God and gives glory to God, a time when "every knee shall bow" (Is.45:23; Rom.14:11). The hardest heart sees, if only at the very last, that the Lord is the Lord after all. How terrible to come to this realization only after life has passed by. But whether in by life of a man (for the believer) or by the death of a man (for the unbeliever) God will be glorified in all that He does.

Notes:

1. BDB, op.cit. 426b.
2. M. Neal, "Crossing the Red Sea," *Biblical Viewpoint* 62 (1978) 31.

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