

## Exodus 14 (NIV)

1 Then the LORD said to Moses, 2 "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. 3 Pharaoh will think, 'The Israelites are wandering around the land in confusion, hemmed in by the desert.' 4 And I will harden Pharaoh's heart, and he will pursue them. But I will gain glory for myself through Pharaoh and all his army, and the Egyptians will know that I am the LORD." So the Israelites did this.

5 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!" 6 So he had his chariot made ready and took his army with him. 7 He took six hundred of the best chariots, along with all the other chariots of Egypt, with officers over all of them. 8 The LORD hardened the heart of Pharaoh king of Egypt, so that he pursued the Israelites, who were marching out boldly.

9 The Egyptians-- all Pharaoh's horses and chariots, horsemen and troops-- pursued the Israelites and overtook them as they camped by the sea near Pi Hahiroth, opposite Baal Zephon. 10 As Pharaoh approached, the Israelites looked up, and there were the Egyptians, marching after them. They were terrified and cried out to the LORD.

11 They said to Moses, "Was it because there were no graves in Egypt that you brought us to the desert to die? What have you done to us by bringing us out of Egypt? 12 Didn't we say to you in Egypt, 'Leave us alone; let us serve the Egyptians'? It would have been better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die in the desert!"

13 Moses answered the people, "Do not be afraid. Stand firm and you will see the deliverance the LORD will bring you today. The Egyptians you see today you will never see again. 14 The LORD will fight for you; you need only to be still."

15 Then the LORD said to Moses, "Why are you crying out to me? Tell the Israelites to move on. 16 Raise your staff and stretch out your hand over the sea to divide the water so that the Israelites can go through the sea on dry ground. 17 I will harden the hearts of the Egyptians so that they will go in after them. And I will gain glory through Pharaoh and all his army, through his chariots and his horsemen. 18 The Egyptians will know that I am the LORD when I gain glory through Pharaoh, his chariots and his horsemen."

19 Then the angel of God, who had been traveling in front of Israel's army, withdrew

and went behind them. The pillar of cloud also moved from in front and stood behind them, 20 coming between the armies of Egypt and Israel. Throughout the night the cloud brought darkness to the one side and light to the other side; so neither went near the other all night long.

21 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, 22 and the Israelites went through the sea on dry ground, with a wall of water on their right and on their left. 23 The Egyptians pursued them, and all Pharaoh's horses and chariots and horsemen followed them into the sea.

24 During the last watch of the night the LORD looked down from the pillar of fire and cloud at the Egyptian army and threw it into confusion. 25 He made the wheels of their chariots come off so that they had difficulty driving. And the Egyptians said, "Let's get away from the Israelites! The LORD is fighting for them against Egypt."

26 Then the LORD said to Moses, "Stretch out your hand over the sea so that the waters may flow back over the Egyptians and their chariots and horsemen." 27 Moses stretched out his hand over the sea, and at daybreak the sea went back to its place. The Egyptians were fleeing toward it, and the LORD swept them into the sea. 28 The water flowed back and covered the chariots and horsemen-- the entire army of Pharaoh that had followed the Israelites into the sea. Not one of them survived.

29 But the Israelites went through the sea on dry ground, with a wall of water on their right and on their left. 30 That day the LORD saved Israel from the hands of the Egyptians, and Israel saw the Egyptians lying dead on the shore. 31 And when the Israelites saw the great power the LORD displayed against the Egyptians, the people feared the LORD and put their trust in him and in Moses his servant.

This scene from Exodus, Moses and the Israelites crossing the Red Sea, fleeing the rapidly approaching Egyptian army, running across the seabed between two walls of water – it describes one of the most dramatic moments found in the Old Testament. In it, we witness a display of God's power, a display of God's love for his people, performed on an enormous scale and stage.

Almost as long as films have existed, there have been movies trying to capture, trying to present this moment as it might have really looked. And thanks to the miracle of modern technology, specifically, a website called YouTube, I have one of those movie clips to share with you today.

In some ways, it's just what you'd expect to see in any screenplay of today's reading – there are the weary, frightened, rag-tag mob of Israelites, trapped, and in a growing panic. We see the wildly charging Egyptian army – spears and shields, swords and chariots flashing in the desert sun. At center stage is Moses, standing between the people and the sea, his staff in his hand, the full weight of their predicament bearing down on his already bent and burdened shoulders.

In this sense, there's nothing really new or surprising here for us to see. Yet in other ways, this particular clip pointed me toward new insights into this truly magnificent, yet at the same time all too familiar, Biblical scene.

First is the short statement, and the question that follows, which the editors included at the beginning and ending of this clip. It is simple and direct, “You know I AM” and “Do you trust me?”

Second, this is the first red sea crossing I've seen that takes a look beneath the surface of the water – we are given glimpses, hints, of the great geological forces, the great forces of nature, which God the Creator set in motion to make this miracle happen.

Third there is the expression on Moses' face, at both the beginning and at the end of the clip.

It is not a look of triumph, nor is it an expression of great faith or confidence. The way this actor plays it, it appears that Moses has no idea what will happen there at the shore, as God's people sit pinned between the waters and the warriors. There is no smirking, no smugness – nothing to suggest that Moses has read on ahead in his Bible, that somehow he knows how this 14<sup>th</sup> chapter of Exodus will end.

Instead what we see on Moses' face is a look of desperation, a look of longing, a look of surprise. It is the face of one who knows all too well how far beyond his own control, beyond his own influence and power, the outcome of his life, and the lives of all God's people, rests.

But like they say, a picture is worth a thousand words, so I'll stop talking now and let you watch this 3:30 minute video with me.

(run video)

The first question I ask when I read this chapter, and when I see this clip is this, “Why did God put his people, Israel, into such a tight spot? Why did God place them in such grave danger? Why a danger from which only a miraculous, divine intervention could save them?”

After loosing all those plagues on Egypt, it seems to me like God could have saved everyone, himself included, a whole lot of trouble and anguish if he had just had a couple of ferry boats waiting there to take his people across the sea. Or better yet, how about just leaving Pharaoh alone, not pushing him to hitch up the chariots and charge 'hell bent for leather' after his fleeing Hebrew slaves.

NO, instead God has set up one more showdown, one more confrontation, between him and his people, and the Egyptian Pharaoh and his army.

I want to ask, “Hey, Moses has done his job, the people are out of Egypt, they're free – why is God still making trouble here?”

I want to know, “What is God's ultimate purpose in all this?”

The answer lies in the opening words of that movie clip, “You know who I AM.” They are words taken from scripture, where God says, “so that you may know that I AM the Lord.”

This phrase occurs some 68 times in the OT, 9 times in the book of Exodus, and twice in this chapter. In Exodus, God uses these words to state his purpose when he speaks to Moses. God also says this when he speaks to the Israelites. God says that this is his reason for doing all he does to Pharaoh. God says it to the Egyptians. God's purpose in Exodus, from beginning to end, is this, that everybody, Moses and pharaoh, Hebrew and Egyptian, would know that the Lord, the one who gave his name to Moses at the burning bush, “I AM,” that this is God. This is God, the Lord, and there is no other.

As scripture describes and the movie clip shows, God's parting of the sea makes this clear as daylight to all involved. Here, the God who created the land and the sea, the one who called the fish and all the other creatures into being – here God moves again over the face of the waters, God makes a way for his people where there was no way before.

In one great act, through the waters of that sea, God delivers, God saves his people from certain destruction. Through those same waters, God deals out death to those - to pharaoh and his army – who would have seen God's people die.

Now, of course, every film that attempts to depict this is a human effort, a human interpretation of what the Bible describes. But in my thinking, if what really happened there on the seashore was even close to this film maker's vision, there is no doubt that on that day, all God's people got the message. They left the Red Sea behind them knowing that the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the God who spoke through Moses, the God whose name is “I AM” - is the Lord, and not just their Lord, but Lord of all. The Israelites must have walked off the seabed, safe on that far shore, certain beyond any shadow of a doubt that all life and salvation, all victory and freedom, belong solely to God Almighty.

Like I said, it is a powerful scene. Even today, the crossing of the red sea serves as a defining moment for people of Jewish faith and identity. But here's another question for you – where does the parting of the waters, this crossing of the sea, what does it do for us?

In my experience, it is the rare exception for someone to be involved in such a dramatic act of God's rescuing as what we've read and watched this morning. We don't read about acts of God's power on this magnitude, involving these numbers of people, this much geography in today's news.

If we're to take this scene as it's written, as it's depicted, then we've also got to ask, “Where are the miraculous rescues, the impossible saves - where are the parting of the seas - in our lives, in these days? If God could do it that way back then, then why doesn't God do it that way right now?”

There are some who will argue the historical accuracy of this chapter of Exodus, who will question and challenge and try to explain by other means the miraculous nature of Israel's escape from Egypt. But I think the more important question to ask of this text, rather, is this, what does God do for us, today, when we stand trapped between deep waters and the enemy's sword?

To offer an answer to that, let me take you back to the three insights this clip provided me.

Let me start with Moses – that look of desperation, of being overwhelmed, of not knowing what is going to happen next, or how. I really like that, because that's how I feel most of the time. It accurately represents my outlook on life during those hours that I'm not asleep. I like to think that even Moses, such a powerful figure of faith, obedience, and trust – that even he was scared to death sometimes. I'm encouraged by the thought that sometimes even Moses didn't know what to do.

And if it was OK for Moses, a man who saw God face to face, to look at what was happening and wonder, “can God really pull me through this time?”, then it's OK for me to do the same.

Moses did what God asked, but the truth is that he asked an awful lot of questions along the way. Moses raised his arms and staff, but I'm sure he had no clue what was going to happen next.

That's what it means to live by faith. Faithfulness does not mean you never have doubts, that you plow blindly ahead, always smiling and confident that God is going to throw open the way before you. Rather, faithfulness is more like feeling your way ahead, like a blind person, all the while clinging tightly to God's strong hand. Faithfulness and obedience to God is not about knowing what will happen next - it's having no clue what so ever, yet still setting fear aside, it's being able to trust whatever plan God has in mind. Because he's God.

Which takes us to the second point. Who are we talking about here? It's God. You know, "The Lord." I especially like the movie clip's shot of the fish and the underwater lava flows because it reminds me that this is the God who spoke and made something out of nothing. This is the God who said, "Let there be," and there it was. A little puddle of water like the Red Sea isn't much of an obstacle for God. A horde of charging Egyptians – not a problem. God is big enough to handle anything and everything in my life, any challenge or dilemma that I could ever face. God has it in his hand. God is steady, and God is sure.

Finally, those opening and closing words. "You know I AM." The words "I AM" are special in scripture, because they are God's own name. God reveals this to Moses at the burning bush, when Moses asks what to say when God's people demand to know who sent him. I AM is as close to a proper name for God as we can get. Our English translation comes from a Hebrew word that means something like – "I will be." Taken together, this name carries the sense that God has been. And God is. And God will be. God has seen it all, because God made it all. God was there before everything began. And God will be there when the final curtain comes down. And there's nothing in between, nothing that can happen in your life or mine, that is beyond God's reach, God's control, or God's purpose.

In the end, I think the editors of this clip got the crossing of the sea right. In the end, it comes down to trust. Can you trust that God will do what only God can do? Can you place your

hope, your faith, your very life, in the hands of one whose ways are beyond your understanding?

With waters towering high over your head, and the wheels of the chariots closing in from behind, can you trust God to bring you through it? Trust that the glory of the destination is worth all the mystery, all the troubles, all the questions we encounter along the journey?

Moses, do you trust him? People, of God, do you trust him?

I'll close today with a question from the Heidelberg Catechism, written in 1562, the first question, one which gets right to the heart of the matter. That question asks this, "What is your only comfort, in life and in death?"

The answer. "That I belong--body and soul, in life and in death--not to myself but to my faithful Savior, Jesus Christ, who at the cost of his own blood has fully paid for all my sins and has completely freed me from the dominion of the devil; that he protects me so well that without the will of my Father in heaven not a hair can fall from my head; indeed, that everything must fit [God's] purpose for my salvation. Therefore, by his Holy Spirit, he also assures me of eternal life, and makes me wholeheartedly willing and ready from now on to live for him.

People of the living God, do not be afraid. Stand firm, and know the God who is I AM, he fights for you. Be still, and know that the Lord is, and will always, be strong to save. In the name of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, our Lord, amen.