

**By faith the people passed through the Red Sea as on dry land; but when the Egyptians tried to do so, they were drowned.**

**(Hebrews 11:29)**

From the time I was about 6 years old my parents took me to the Sunday evening service at church

- Since then, apart from illness or the unavailability of a service to attend, I have not missed very many
- My parents were quite strict Sabbatharians and in order to emphasise that Sunday was a very different day
- They did not watch TV, listen to the radio, allow the playing of pop music or games with dice and cards
- Growing up with that, I just accepted that was the way things were and in my adult years continued it
- But the one time of the week that I really did not like was the bit after the Sunday evening service
- Happily, we would often be invited to the home of someone else from church
- As my Dad was a Methodist local preacher and travelled extensively, these were often fun visits
- As there would be families with other children, sometimes with parents who were not as strict as mine
- But on this particular evening, when I was about 8 years old, things were not looking all that promising
- The couple who invited us were in their 80s and were much given to very serious conversation
- There were no other children – the couple had a prefab with a surprisingly large lounge
- So a lot of people would be invited to come – and as a rule I was just expected to sit quietly and listen
- Perhaps feeling a bit sorry for me, the elderly hostess took me aside to play a game, and that evening
- I learned how to play chess

Although chess is a game I am not very good at, not least since my childhood for want of someone to play

- I can explain the basics to you – the object is to capture your opponent's king, by moving pieces
- (each player has sixteen pieces, there are six kinds each with distinctive moves on the board)
- If a piece could move to a certain square that square is under attack and a king cannot move there

The longest ever tournament chess game lasted 20 hours and 15 minutes and included 269 moves

- No doubt that was a fairly complex game – but even a relatively simply game
- There is a possibility of putting your opponent in a situation where he or she does what you expect
- Or better still, putting your opponent in a situation where there is no choice but to do what you expect

The early days of the Exodus are something like a complicated game of chess

- It is the beginning of the nation of Israel itself, from a band of slaves to a nation
- But when the Israelites leave Egypt, God leads them on a path that they may not have expected
- It is a longer route rather than a shorter one – to avoid military conflict with the Philistines
- This circuitous route seems to be one of the things that gives Egypt the impetus to follow

This alternate route will quickly result in a much greater test of their faith

- God had led the children of Israel to an encampment at the edge of the Red Sea
- With no escape route and Pharaoh and his chariots in hot pursuit
- they people were terrified by the approach of the Egyptian army and had begun to complain bitterly
- but, like a master chess player, God had induced Pharaoh to move his king into checkmate (Enns)
- Sceptical commentators sometimes want to make this a lesser body of water to diminish the miracle
- But this was not a shallow, marshy area, but a substantial body of water, the writer to the Hebrews says:
- ‘By faith the people passed through the Red Sea as on dry land;’ the people shared the faith of Moses
- The NIV inserts the word ‘people’ to show that the verb is plural – that is ‘they crossed’
- They had no escape route – but, at God’s command, they were prepared to attempt the impossible
- ‘by faith,’ has specific reference to the command of God to ‘go forward’ (Ex. 14:15)
- In this we see:

## I THEIR DANGER WAS VERY GREAT

We cannot underestimate the danger that the people of God faced at the Red Sea

- With the Red Sea before them, steep rocks and mountains on either side, and an enemy in pursuit
- Being led by the pillar of cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night did not seem to have helped
- And if their encampment at Pi Hahiroth, between Migdol and the sea caused Pharaoh to conclude
- ‘The Israelites are wandering around the land in confusion, hemmed in by the desert.’
- There is more than a possibility that the people themselves would have wondered what was going on
- Pharaoh’s force was not small – 600 of the best chariots and other chariots, horsemen and troops
- The people were terrified. ‘Were there no graves in Egypt? It would have been better to die there.’

At the time the letter to the Hebrews was written, the recipients were undergoing great persecution

- It is a time when people needed to be exhorted in their faith and to remember those who had gone before
- Did the situation always work out as the people would have wanted?
- Clearly not for the writer acknowledges that some ‘saints of old’ have been persecuted and martyred
- But the ultimate prize – to be saved and with the Lord in his eternal kingdom – is still in sight
- So just as Moses exhorted the people,
- ‘Do not be afraid. Stand firm and you will see the deliverance the LORD will bring you today.’
- So the recipients of the letter to the Hebrews must do the same
- And, indeed, it is a message for Christians in every age and generation, when things get tough
- It is not as simplistic as saying , ‘don’t worry everything will be okay’
- In an earthly sense, as for some of the readers, as for some of the believers in previous generations
- Things did not work out okay – but the focus of the writer was on something greater
- In the face of a seemingly hopeless situation, God can still do something completely unexpected

## II THEIR DELIVERANCE WAS VERY GLORIOUS

By faith they passed through the Red Sea as on dry land – Exodus (14:22-22) puts it this way:

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, and the Israelites went through the sea on dry ground, with a wall of water on their right and on their left.

Moses stretched out his hand as he had been commanded (Ex. 14:16) but it was God who worked the miracle

- While we can speculate about the coincidental nature of the wind
- The Bible account is quite clear that the people passed through the sea with a wall of water on either side
- As with other Bible accounts of miracles an important question is whether God intervenes in our world
- If God does not intervene in our world, then we have to discount his part in everything extraordinary
- But if God does intervene in our world, then is it right to put a limit on how he might intervene?
- In any event, the manner of his doing it is incidental to the fact that God rescued the people
- ‘Not tides, not storms, not bad planning, not tactical error, not bad luck, or good luck, but God’ (Durham)

The most important thing for the original readers of Hebrews and for Christians in every generation to learn

- Is that the deliverance of God is very glorious – following his arrest in the Dutch city of Haarlem
- Caspar ten Boom, had been arrested for offering sanctuary to Jews hiding from persecution
- His interrogator said: I’d like to send you home, I’ll take your word that you won’t cause any more trouble
- Caspar replied: ‘if I go home today, tomorrow I will open my door again to any man in need who knocks’
- And so Caspar ten Boom remained in custody and 10 days later died – it doesn’t sound very glorious, but
- In another cell, his daughter, Corrie, scratched a date on her wall, adding beside it – ‘Father released’

### III THEIR DESTRUCTION WAS COMPLETE

The writer to the Hebrews adds, ‘but when the Egyptians tried to do so, they were drowned.’

- For the modern reader, the destruction of the Egyptians is certainly an unpalatable part of the story
- Why did God not just leave them on the other shore, gazing across at the disappearing Israelites?
- How should it be that the Egyptians, though presumptuously attempting to follow Israel through the sea,
- Should be thrown into confusion, the symbol of their strength (their chariots), the means of their doom
- No sooner are they in the trap, their wheels clogged and bogged down, than the waters return
- And, in a very graphic touch, suggesting an eye-witness account, not only are the Egyptians drowned
- But they are seen, lying dead on the shore – their destruction was complete
- the thrust of the story is that God did it and Israel saw it – they saw God’s power fighting for them
- salvation and new life for Israel are now assured, for their former slave-masters lie defeated

The mercy and wrath of God are seen in a single incident – the route of glorious deliverance for Israel

- was the same route of complete destruction for the Egyptians – and the victory is declared as God’s
- to the original readers of the letter to the Hebrews, under persecution, we can understand their relishing
- this story of the enemies of God’s chosen people getting their come-uppance – but what about us?
- It is clear that the ultimate goal of the Egypt’s tragic end is that God will bring glory to himself
- But it is surely legitimate to ask, ‘how God can be glorified by killing his enemies?’
- For some people it is as simple as saying that this is a picture of the Old Testament God of wrath
- But it is not as simple as that – there is plenty of grace in the OT even toward enemies (Isa. 19:16-25)
- And a good bit of wrath in the New Testament (Matt. 8:12; Rev. 14:14-20)
- As Baptist minister and Bible scholar, Peter Enns, says, ‘God is not as tame as we would like him to be’

So far, we have interpreted the Biblical narrative of the crossing of the Red Sea, against Hebrews

- With particular reference to early, probably Jewish, Christians being persecuted under the Roman Empire
- But what are we to make of this story today – how are we to understand the meaning of Exodus?
- Is it just an ancient story with little more than antiquarian interest for those who like that kind of thing?

The New Testament writers are clear that Exodus has to be understood in the light of our relationship to Christ

- This is part of the great story of salvation and, for us, Christ is the new Moses
- But it is not as easy as saying – God you delivered the Israelites out of Egypt, now do the same for me
- As if this were a general pattern that we can then apply to a variety of circumstances
- Rather, it is the other way round, there is a general pattern of God's salvation that is applied here
- In which God is calling people from one type of existence to another – it is a picture of salvation

So then, this is not a picture of God's deliverance from the trials and tribulations of regular life

- We are not to say, 'What I am going through now is like Israel's experience in Egypt'
- Rather we have to celebrate God's great deliverance and acknowledge we have passed through the sea
- God delivered Israel from Egypt by grace, because he keeps his promise to Abraham and the patriarchs
- Without God's salvation, the danger is very great – for the danger is death
- His deliverance is very glorious – for it is by the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ
- Who, by entering into the Holy Place above, is leading many sons to glory
- Rather more soberly, the destruction of the enemies of God is complete (cf. Isaiah 43:16-17)
- The Egyptians are drowned in the sea for drowning the Israelite children in the Nile
- It is an awesome disclosure of the sovereign power of God and a pledge of his unfailing love to his people
- And the way that the believer grasps hold of God's saving grace is 'by faith'
- The sea, through which his people pass, remains parted until the coming of Christ in glory