

Text: Exod. 14:1-14

Title: Can God's salvation fail?

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Introduction: In the Book of Esther, Israel is once again in captivity, this time at the hands of the Persian Emperor Xerxes I. In chapter 3 of the book, Xerxes' lieutenant Haman convinces the powerful king to issue a decree that the Jewish people are to be destroyed. He did so because the Jew Mordecai refused to bow to him. The last verse of that chapter tells us that the royal city of Shushan was perplexed as a result, meaning that the town was thrown into mass confusion.

That word *perplexed* also occurs in Joel 1:18 of herds of animals that can find no pasture that is not burned up in God's judgment. Jesus saw the lives of lost people that way: "But when he saw the multitudes, he was moved with compassion on them, because they fainted, and were scattered abroad, as sheep having no shepherd" (Matt. 9:36).

And the only other time this word is used in the Old Testament, it comes from the Lord about what Pharaoh would say in verse 3 of our passage. Pharaoh says of the newly redeemed people of God, "They are entangled in the land; the wilderness hath shut them in." The word *entangled* is this same word. Like a city in an uproar of mass confusion, like cattle scattered with no place to pasture, Israel, says Pharaoh, is entangled in the land and trapped in the wilderness.

Unfortunately, Pharaoh had a point. God's people, miraculously delivered from the bondage of their slavery only

days earlier, now were undeniably entangled in the land and shut in by the wilderness.

How can this be? How can the redeemed people of God find themselves trapped and “sitting ducks” for the enemy’s intentions to destroy all that God had just accomplished in their lives? Pharaoh’s answer was simple: “The Lord’s work of salvation has failed.” That answer is a simple one, at some level even a seemingly obvious one, but in the end an entirely false one. When the enemy claims that God’s salvation has failed, we find ourselves asking the question, “Can God’s salvation fail?”

That will be the title of our study of this passage this morning, and I want us to see that God’s salvation never fails. What looks to Pharaoh like that failure is in fact the continuance of God’s mighty work of saving His people. That work has both a purpose and a challenge. We will take them one at a time.

I. Remember God’s purpose when it seems His salvation has failed (vv. 1-8).

Illustration: At times we are involved in a job in which we seem like we are taking one step forward and then two back. I have been taking some of the shingles off the back of the parsonage recently, and that is a job that can be a lot like that. You go to take one rotted shingle off, and as you do you also break off the two good ones above it by reaching behind them for the nails that were holding the one below. For each step forward, you take two backward.

Application: That must have been the initial reaction of Moses and Israel to the Lord’s command in verse 2. They begin to look like they are entangled by the land and shut in by the

wilderness when the Lord tells them to turn around and go back the way they came.

At this point in their journey, Egyptologists and Bible scholars get a bit entangled and perplexed with Israel as they try to retrace their ancient footsteps. Some try to locate the Red Sea crossing in the Gulf of Aqaba, but I just think that is too far away for what is described here. Most Bible students are agreed that Moses has headed initially for the Way of Shur, one of the main routes from Egypt to the east that got you past a greatly fortified canal called the Walls of the Ruler. This pass began just north of Timsah Lake, near where the town of Ismailia, Egypt is today. That was the route Abraham had taken to Egypt, the way Hagar started back to Egypt after Sarah had expelled her, and the way Joseph went to bury his father in Palestine.

So Moses and Israel are making great progress toward or on the Way of Shur, when the Lord tells them to go back the way they came. At this point some scholars believe that they went north, that they camped along the Mediterranean Sea, and that the Red Sea crossing happened through a body of water that no longer exists due to the construction of the Suez Canal. Others believe that Israel turned south, camped along the Gulf of Suez, and eventually crossed that Gulf. The Hebrew words translated *Red Sea* are *Yam Suph*, and it is a label the ancients used for the entire water system that surrounded the Sinai Peninsula, including the both the northern lakes that were a part of the canal system all the way around to the Gulf of Aqaba on the eastern side.

What the theories have in common is that both require God's supernatural intervention in order to happen, although the northbound theories spend more time trying to explain the event as a timing miracle more than a miracle

that manipulates natural phenomena. The northbound theory relies heavily on Exod. 10:19, "And the Lord turned a mighty strong west wind, which took away the locusts, and cast them into the Red Sea; there remained not one locust in all the coasts of Egypt." They point out that the northern lakes were directly East of Goshen, where Israel lived. The southbound theory replies that it is probable that the locust were not even in Goshen, and that since they were in all of Egypt, the Gulf of Suez certainly was also directly east.

I believe that Moses and Israel went south and crossed the Gulf of Suez for four reasons. (1) The name Pi-hahiroth (v. 2) literally means "mouth of the canal." It would seem to me that the start of the canal system at the northern end of the Gulf of Suez would be reasonably called "the mouth of the canal." (2) The northbound theory requires that Israel headed into the Way of the Horus, which Exodus calls the Way of the Philistines. Exod. 13:17 told us that the Lord avoided that path for reasons that really had not changed. (3) The historian Josephus records these events with reference to Israel's entrapment by the precipices of a mountain. There is no mountain northward. You have to go south if you are going to get trapped between a mountain and water. (4) Finally, when God splits the seas, two walls of water form, one on each side (Exod. 14:22). The northern scenarios do not seem to have enough water to do that.

And so Israel is trapped. They have taken one step forward but two or three backward. And the question must now be asked, "Is the enemy right?" "Has God's work of salvation failed?" Our passage gives us the answer by pointing out that the Lord is in control of these circumstances and accomplishing His unfailing purpose through them. Progress in God's work of salvation often looks like one step forward and two back, but when it does, it is the plan of the Lord.

This unfailing purpose is simply the truth of verse 4. God says He will be honored in the advance of His enemy. He says that when He is honored in this way, the Egyptians would know better what they evidently still did not know well enough – that the God of the Bible is the true God, the Lord. Do you and I know and honor Him?

That same work of salvation is happening in your life and mine if you have been redeemed from the slavery of your sin. This work will allow us to take one step forward and two back at times on our way out of the bondage of our old slavery to sin, but know that God's purposes behind His work of salvation for His people remain the same.

Paul puts that purpose this way, "In [Christ] also we have obtained an inheritance, being predestinated according to the purpose of him who worketh all things after the counsel of his own will: that we should be to the praise of his glory, who first trusted Christ." Have you first trusted Christ? If so, you are now predestined to the praise of His glory, even on those days we find ourselves entangled and trapped by the wilderness. God's purpose does not fail. His predestination is unstoppable. The believer's salvation is His unfailing work. Remember this purpose when it seems otherwise.

II. Accept God's challenge when it seems His salvation has failed (vv. 9-14).

Illustration: This past week I stumbled across an interesting fact from history about Egyptian chariots. You may remember from previous messages that I believe along with David Rohl that the devastation of Egypt caused by the Exodus in 1447 BC left the door wide open for the Hyksos invasion, who are described in ancient texts as taking Egypt by storm without much of a fight.

Writing for Ancient Egypt Online, J. Hill also had this to say about that fight between the Egyptians and the Hyksos: “However, the text of the autobiography of Ahmose son of Ibana (which describes the war between Ahmose I and the Hyksos) implies that the ancient Egyptians used marines rather than chariots when attacking Avaris and may not have integrated the chariot into their army until the Hyksos had been expelled” (<https://ancientegyptonline.co.uk/chariots/>).

The author admits some doubt on this point because he also notes earlier in the article that horse remains have been uncovered that belong to the period before the Hyksos invasion, and that a stela has been found of the son of our exodus pharaoh Dudimose (Khonsuemwaset) that includes gloves that were worn by charioteers.

So what does a Bible believer like me conclude from this article? It is simple. Egypt had chariots before the invasion of the Hyksos but not after, and our passage tells us exactly why. God destroyed them in the Red Sea.

Application: Of course, as the Israelites lift up their eyes and see these chariots coming at them, along with the other military force mentioned here, they could not look back on their great victory for the Lord like you and I can. The threat of annihilation was real, and it made them fearful. Their fear caused them to distrust God’s plan, that Moses was to lead them out of Egypt.

Hebrews 3 tells us who our Moses is today: “Wherefore, holy brethren, partakers of the heavenly calling, consider the Apostle and High Priest of our profession, Christ Jesus; Who was faithful to him that appointed him, as also Moses was faithful in all his house. For this man was counted wor-

thy of more glory than Moses, inasmuch as he who hath builded the house hath more honour than the house. For every house is builded by some man; but he that built all things is God" (vv. 1-4).

How often have we taken steps backward, seen the enemy's threatening power and success, felt the pressure of his attack, become fearful, and then faithless that our Apostle and Shepherd knows what He is doing? How much worse is our sin than Israel's questioning of Moses?

Yet in His abundant grace, God provides an answer for our sinful questionings and doubts (v. 13a): "Fear not (this is going to take some courage), stand still (don't run away), see the salvation of the Lord (He can do what you and I cannot, and you are not going to want to miss this)." You and I are eternally secure in God's work of salvation (v. 13b). We will never again see the bondage of slavery to our taskmaster sin. The sins we see today we shall someday no longer see again forever. When the Lord fights for us, we simply need to hold our peace. That is the challenge.

Conclusion: Have you ever experienced anything that was so glorious that it left you speechless? I received a text recently from my Aunt Barb that hit me that way. You know that we have been praying for her difficult cancer battle. We have a brother and sister in Kenya who are praying for her, and I sent her word of their prayers and ours.

She replied this way: "Good morning Kevin, thank you so much for sending the email from the Kenya missionaries. I am so very grateful for their prayers. It overwhelms me and gives me such peace. I am having a good day and believe that is because our Lord is hearing from my prayer warriors. Through all this, I am grateful as this experience has

brought me to a new level with my Lord. Love you bunches and I know how much your dad appreciates all your hard work.”

When we face days of being entangled in the land and trapped in the wilderness, our God says, “I am going to fight for you, and you are going to know my love for you at such a new level that you will not know what to say.” This is His promise to us even when we are fearful and question His wisdom.

But what if Israel had not accepted this answer? What if they had run – scattering to the mountains or jumping into the sea? We will have setbacks. God’s purposes include one step forward and two back at times. That much is certain. The only question is “How shall we respond?” when the setbacks come. Has God’s salvation failed? Or will we fear not, stand still, and see the salvation of the Lord?

“A man came – I think it was actually in Philadelphia – on one occasion to the great George Whitefield and asked if he might print his sermons. Whitefield gave this reply; he said, ‘Well, I have no inherent objection, if you like, but you will never be able to put on the printed page the lightning and the thunder.’ That is the distinction – the sermon, and the ‘lightning and the thunder.’ To Whitefield this was of very great importance, and it should be of very great importance to all preachers, as I hope to show. You can put the sermon into print, but not the lightning and the thunder. That comes into the act of preaching and cannot be conveyed by cold print. Indeed it almost baffles the descriptive powers of the best reporters.”

–David Martin Lloyd-Jones,

*Preachers and Preaching*